ARE WE SETTLING FOR LESS IN INDIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM?

Ft. Vandana Goyal and Akshay Saxena

Sattva Knowledge Institute SKI

DECODING
Impact

[00:00:11] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** If there's one investment that can take a family out of intergenerational poverty, it is education.

[00:00:15] **Akshay Saxena:** Our obsession with scale and with systemic solutions gets in the way, because the moment you put this constraint on saying that, "Oh, we are only interested in solutions that governments can implement for every single child," At that point in time, you miss supporting the child who could be a great artist, you miss supporting the child who could be a great athlete.

[00:00:30] **Vandana Goyal:** And the first thing that you have to do as an educator, is create that environment for them in their classrooms. When they feel loved, when they feel that they can learn.

[00:00:40] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** What does it truly take to create exceptional outcomes within the public education system?

[00:00:46] **Vandana Goyal:** It's a parent who has the same dreams and ambition and belief in their child as all of us do and that is the defining determining factor, I believe.

[00:00:55] **Akshay Saxena:** I think having conversations with the government about their children and our children matters much more than having conversations about their operations and their systems.

[00:01:02] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** We don't know where great kids are going to come from.

[00:01:04] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** And designing for greatness, as a way to identify and provide those opportunities for this distributed talent is very, very critical.

[00:01:12] **Vandana Goyal:** I don't think learning is going to change until you change the way kids learn.

[00:01:16] **Vandana Goyal:** If that same girl is outperforming in elementary school or primary school, then it is not about her cognitive ability. Somewhere along the way, she is being told silently, implicitly, by her parents, her community, her school, that maths and science is not something that she is meant to be good at.

[00:01:35] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** For every new philanthropist who's investing in education, can they make a case for investing in excellence, investing in STEM for girls and investing in making those role models happen?

[00:01:45] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** Welcome to Decoding Impact from Sattva Knowledge Institute hosted by me, Rathish Balakrishnan, where we take a look at population scale problems that need immediate and urgent attention and go beyond seemingly simple solutions to understand what does it take to solve these problems at system scale by engaging with experts on this topic.

[00:02:05] Rathish Balakrishnan: One story that everybody who has capital and wants to invest in impact resonates with, is this idea that investing in education is going to solve for impact. I often say that education is the Harry Potter of social impact. Everybody loves it. Everybody wants to put money in it. Take any part of capital, you'll realise that there is money going to education.

[00:02:26] Rathish Balakrishnan: But the almost sad reality is that there's a lot of work and money that's gone into education that has not resulted in the impact that we desire. Every year, ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) tells us the same story that our grade 5 child is not reading the grade 2 text. And then there are new theories about, you know, let's bring technology, let's do EdTech and let's replace teachers.

[00:02:47] Rathish Balakrishnan: But we haven't, despite the best minds in the country working on it, and with a lot of capital to solve this problem. And it sort of begets the question, which is, are we even setting the bar high enough? Or are we, to put it mildly, setting poor goals for poor people?

[00:03:03] Rathish Balakrishnan: To answer this question, I want to bring in two people who've actually worked on the ground with people with economically poor backgrounds on creating solutions that can solve for intergenerational poverty. And what I want to understand today with the guests that I have, is a question of what does it truly take to create exceptional outcomes within the public education system? And how do we make this happen at scale?

[00:03:28] Rathish Balakrishnan: Joining me today are Akshay and Vandana. Both dear friends and people who today are co-CEOs of Avanti Fellows. I will let the two of them introduce themselves, but Akshay and Vandana, thanks so much for being part of this conversation.

[00:03:41] Akshay Saxena: Thanks for having us.

[00:03:43] Vandana Goyal: Thank you for having us.

[00:03:45] Akshay Saxena: I can go first. I'm Akshay. I co-founded Avanti now almost 15 years ago. Before that, I used to be a consultant and helped start a medical device company in California. Started off at Avanti as a teacher, which I still think was my favourite part, teaching physics, the subject that everyone hates. But now, tech and product at Avanti.

[00:04:05] Rathish Balakrishnan: Akshay, one question for you. If you started this 15 years ago, how old were you when you actually started this?

[00:04:11] Akshay Saxena: I was 27. 26, I think it was. Yeah, 26-27.

[00:04:15] Rathish Balakrishnan: Excellent. Vandana, do you want to give us your introduction?

[00:04:20] Vandana Goyal: Sure. Hi, I'm Vandana Goyal. I'm the co-CEO of Avanti Fellows. I've been living and working in India for the last 18 years. I was born and raised in the U.S. I started off my career as well, as a teacher, teaching math to middle school students, which is also the

least favourite age for most teachers and found myself in Mumbai with the Akanksha Foundation first, where I later, became the CEO, before joining Avanti.

[00:04:50] Rathish Balakrishnan: Thank you. Thank you both of you for being here. I want to start with a story as to why I thought we should discuss and be on this podcast together. Avanti Fellows recently organised an event where they got some of their alumni and their current students to meet with, in Mumbai.

[00:05:05] Rathish Balakrishnan: And I had a chance to meet with this young boy in grade 11, I think, who came to me and said that his father was a farmer. Apparently, he invested a lot of money in lady's finger or turmeric, you know, to really reap financial gains and actually had a significant financial setback as a family.

[00:05:22] Rathish Balakrishnan: That got him to think as to why that would happen and how he can solve this problem at scale. And he actually built a solution that involved drones and bots, et cetera, to actually solve this problem. And today actually he has a fighting chance of getting into MIT if his solution gets selected.

[00:05:40] Rathish Balakrishnan: Listening to him, and I was brainstorming with him like he was my peer and saying, Hey, why do you look at this? What is the OpEx and CapEx of this? And I started to think, this child is from a government school. This is not anyone's image of a child from a government school. The child from a government school is actually a very, very different mental model.

[00:05:59] Rathish Balakrishnan: And that lack of imagination is probably the biggest problem. So the first question, Akshay, I'd probably start with you. You've worked in this space and you've had a chance to look at education overall. The question is, are we even aiming high enough and what is your view of what's happening in the education space today from a philanthropy point of view?

[00:06:17] Akshay Saxena: I don't think we are, because I feel like we are perfectly fine with young people graduating school and perhaps graduating college with no shot at all of having a better life than their parents. I think it's something which collectively a society we seem to be okay with.

[00:06:34] Akshay Saxena: And I think it's really, really important to set foundational goals for everyone just to say everyone should be able to read and write. Everyone should be able to access public services. That's essential, obviously, but to believe that we can create public education at such high scale and not even aspire to have children who go to these schools have the same opportunity as us, I think there's something fundamentally warped.

[00:06:56] Akshay Saxena: And I do think our obsession with scale, and with systemic solutions gets in the way, because I feel like the moment you put this constraint on saying that, "Oh, we are only interested in solutions that governments can implement for every single child," at that point in time, you miss supporting the child who could be a great artist. You miss supporting the

child who could be a great athlete. You miss supporting a child like Kushal who could, you know, one day be a great engineer.

[00:07:20] Akshay Saxena: And you in some ways perversely rob the children who would, by all likelihood, escape poverty and maybe lead the country one day of even that chance. How one gets around that politically, I think is a more complicated question, but my short answer is no.

[00:07:38] Rathish Balakrishnan: Thank you, Akshay. Vandana, I want to come to you. You've had a chance to look at this problem at two models, right? One is the Akanksha model where you ran your own schools and now, you're able to see what Avanti Fellows does as well.

[00:07:51] Rathish Balakrishnan: You know, in some sense, the question that Akshay sort of said is that, Hey, designing for all kids is a problem but when you look at individual child and put the child at the centre, this possibility is actually is very, very real. What have been some of your observations on what enables a child to actually achieve this sort of potential?

[00:08:14] Vandana Goyal: Yeah, that's a great question. I think one thing that has remained consistent over the years that I've been doing this work, is that especially for children from disadvantaged communities they crave a sense of security and care and belonging.

[00:08:32] Vandana Goyal: And the first thing that you have to do as an educator is create that environment for them in their classrooms. When they feel loved, when they feel that you believe in them, they feel that they can learn, right? That half of your battle is done. And I think that is where we fundamentally start off on the wrong foot in all of our schools across the world, not just in India.

[00:08:55] Vandana Goyal: And the second is what you're alluding to, which is, once you create that environment of care and respect, do you really push their own understanding of what they can achieve? Do you really set that bar high enough of, you know, yes, you can solve this problem. Yes, you can read this book. Yes, Kushal can actually solve a problem like that.

[00:09:18] Vandana Goyal: Do we actually approach our work with our students, every day with the belief that they can go to MIT or go to IIT or go wherever they want to and I think those two things in my experience, you know, starting with that foundation of care and respect and belief, but also balancing that with the push and challenge that that students need.

[00:09:43] Vandana Goyal: I think those two things are what all schools need to, to begin with. And that's what we've tried to do in the Akanksha schools. And that's what we try to do in Avanti classrooms as well.

[00:09:53] Rathish Balakrishnan: You know, sometimes we underestimate how important this is. I remember talking to a set of people who started working on learning outcomes and they said, you know, the problem is algebra because you're sort of thinking about where is that academic complexity? Because there's a concept that I don't get.

[00:10:08] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** And I think partly that comes because we've, a lot of what you said, we've as people, take it for granted because our parents were loving, caring, we probably with teachers who gave us that environment. And so we zoned in on, 'Hey, let's solve the algebra problem' because you know, and I remember passionately people discussing with me saying, carry over is the issue.

[00:10:23] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** You solve for carryover, people will get to maths, et cetera. I also want Akshay, maybe for you to come in and give everyone a picture of JNV (Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya) schools. And it's a set of network of schools that not many people know of, you know.

[00:10:37] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** People know KV (Kendriya Vidyalaya) schools and people know regular government schools, but what is this network of JNV schools? And even as a person working in this space, why did you choose to work with them specifically?

[00:10:48] **Akshay Saxena:** Yeah, so it is, I mean, objectively the best performing school system academically in the country. So this is a network of about 630 schools. There's one in every rural district, other than Tamil Nadu. About 25 lakh children take a... two and a half million kids take this test every year in class five.

[00:11:04] **Akshay Saxena:** So there's something, there's a little bit of the Indian absurdity, of the test taking and of that somewhere around 30 and 40, 000 kids get picked, right? So very, very selective schools, but once they get picked, their education is free. So it's residential boarding, lodging, sports, travel, migration across schools.

[00:11:22] **Akshay Saxena:** Everything is paid for all the way to grade 12. In fact, one of our students just told me, I was speaking to her the other day, that, , the reason her mother pushed her to take the JNV exam is she couldn't afford private school for two children.

[00:11:34] **Akshay Saxena:** So this girl was academically smartest. She was told, please take the JNV exam so I can afford to send both of you to school, right?

[00:11:40] **Akshay Saxena:** So in, in rural communities, these schools hold, I mean the same standing as an IIT would hold or an IIM would hold, which is a sure shot way to, in those communities, to progress outside of the everyday rigmarole.

[00:11:54] **Akshay Saxena:** I think what's also remarkable and I think goes back to your question of setting the bar high. And we see this a little bit even with Sainik schools, you see it with Kendriya Vidyalaya to a degree, like whenever as a country or as a public education system, we've set the bar high, we've done pretty well.

[00:12:08] **Akshay Saxena:** You know, like, we tend to do a pretty good job of building reasonably well-funded, not overfunded, but reasonably well-funded institutions of excellence. This is something India is actually good at.

[00:12:19] **Akshay Saxena:** And you can see that in the JNV system, right? Where I think a few years ago there was news of some Olympic athletes coming from the JNV. It's not just academics, you know, these kids, because they get good nutrition, they have a regimented schedule, they play sports. They do well at almost everything, including art and the sciences and sports.

[00:12:36] **Akshay Saxena:** And it doesn't cost that much more, you know, than what we end up spending in municipal schools in a place like Mumbai. And I've always wondered in working in that system, you know, what's different, right? And I think what really is different is culture.

[00:12:49] **Akshay Saxena:** Like Vandana was saying, a culture of care, you know, there's a culture of care, like to the extent where you can imagine, not in the way that private school kids would often experience, but very much in the context of you to experience in a good public institution.

[00:13:02] **Akshay Saxena:** But there's also a real emphasis on excellence. And this is the only school system I've been to where, if children don't get 90% in a public system, things are not okay, right?

[00:13:14] **Akshay Saxena:** This is the only school system where no one talks about pass rate. Like past percentages. That's not under consideration.

[00:13:19] **Akshay Saxena:** I think the teachers, as we've seen, there is pride in being at certain schools. There's pride in them being as a community because they live together on, on the school campus. And I think that residential schools are a big factor there because the teachers live with the children.

[00:13:33] **Akshay Saxena:** We chose to work there because that was literally the only way in the early days that you could find enough children who could even prepare for the JEE.

[00:13:41] **Akshay Saxena:** When we started off, we were a volunteer collective, right? So we would have volunteers at the IIT campuses. We would go around testing children, trying to find children who would A, want to prepare for the JEE and B, could prepare for the JEE.

[00:13:52] **Akshay Saxena:** And we had no money to pay for test prep. So we used to convince coaching classes to take them for free. So they also had to clear that bar, where they would get free coaching.

[00:13:59] **Akshay Saxena:** And we couldn't find kids. Like we would test 10,000-20,000 kids in Mumbai, find four or five. And I think at that point, I met Mohnish Pabrai who runs Dakshana and he himself is a Navodaya alum, now a very well-known hedge fund manager in the U.S.

[00:14:13] **Akshay Saxena:** So he had set up Dakshana Foundation to build residential programs in the JNVs and he said there are so many high-talent kids here that even if I give you the kids who we can't work with right now, you will have enough kids to work with, which I thought was an act of great generosity.

[00:14:26] Akshay Saxena: But also, kind of our pathway into that school system.

[00:14:29] Akshay Saxena: And the first batch we ran was a group of kids who basically taught themselves. Like, we didn't have any teachers. And most of them went to the IITs. Right? So, I think that was a big moment for me of seeing what is possible for myself.

[00:14:41] Rathish Balakrishnan: And, you know, the part, the test obsession, we should come back to it. It's one of my favourite pet peeves. Vandana, you've, in Akanksha, also had similar success stories.

[00:14:50] Rathish Balakrishnan: I know kids who have gone abroad, studied, and not that, that's the only marker of success, but that tells us that our ambition skills are different.

[00:14:57] Rathish Balakrishnan: How did you select children?

[00:14:58] Vandana Goyal: We did not select kids. We used a system called the Lottery System, which is something that's used widely in the United States, in the charter schools there. Everyone can apply. You literally pick names out of the hat. and those are the kids. You have a girl selection and a boy selection, and an equal number. And that's what gets into your school.

[00:15:19] Vandana Goyal: I stopped going to those things because I used to cry because the parents who didn't get admission were so upset. But, you know, who was selecting our schools was their parents, which is a story that's just not talked about enough, right? Like, who is the parent who is waiting in line for hours to put their kid's name in that hat, right?

[00:15:40] Vandana Goyal: And it's a parent who has the same dreams and ambition and belief in their child as all of us do. And that is the defining, determining factor, I believe. And that's why in a gunshot, we work really closely with our parents, because, in the same way that we believe in our students, we operate from a place of belief that most of the parents, there's always environments of abuse and neglect, but most of the parents are just poor.

[00:16:07] Vandana Goyal: They're not stupid. And they're working really hard to better their lives and especially their kids' lives and they're making a choice. They figured out which is the good school in their neighbourhood. They used to call me, they used to call, you know, our staff, they used to come visit us.

[00:16:24] Vandana Goyal: And sometimes our team would get upset about that. And I'd say you know, they're doing whatever they can for their child. And wouldn't you, right? So it's great that they're coming, you know, and calling me. I may not be able to help them, but it's such a sign of their determination for their kid.

[00:16:43] Vandana Goyal: And I think that's a very untold story of why the Akanksha school, I mean, we talk about it a lot in Akanksha, but I think it's an untold story in the sector of of when success happens for kids, it's usually because of their parents, not just because of us.

[00:17:00] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** Absolutely. I mean, I can, I can personally relate to this from my own story, but this is one story that I always tell that I once went to Trichy in Tamil Nadu and I met this couple because this was organised by a sanitation organisation.

[00:17:13] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** They were building their own toilets. You know, they were getting those cement rings, putting it together, building their own toilets. And I said, would you want to not call the mason to build it? He said, 'No, too much money. You know, we want to do this ourselves'.

[00:17:23] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** And both husband and wife, in the dumps building this. And later in the afternoon, I'm seeing them and the mother has changed her clothes and she was wearing a sari and she's waiting on the road and I said, "What are you waiting for?" He said, "My son is coming in a private school bus. I want to be here to pick him up, and make sure that when he comes that I'm here for him".

[00:17:41] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** So they don't want to spend on getting a mason to build a toilet, but they're willing to spend on the private school bus, get dressed up every evening, stand there so that when the son comes, he knows that the parents are there, you know, and I asked her, you haven't learned, you haven't studied, how do you know your son is studying? She said, I don't know, but whenever he reads, I just ask him to read louder because I want him to know that I'm listening. And it was just a moment, right? Because in just so many ways, our parents try to tell us that this is important to me, right?

[00:18:08] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** But let me put this together. In a lottery system, you select children and those children just have outsized returns on their lives compared to any other child who goes to a government school. It's entirely random, right? There is no test, there's no probability.

[00:18:22] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** And what both of you are saying is that with the right intent and culture, we can build a school that can create outcomes for children. Why can't we have like lakhs of such schools? What's the systemic constraint to making that happen?

[00:18:38] **Akshay Saxena:** Yeah...I mean, I can go, there are several. I think one is, our public systems are too large. I think that's challenge one, right? Like I think our, I mean, this is, I'm sure we could talk about this from a governance lens or a healthcare lens or an education lens. I think our unit size is too large.

[00:18:53] **Akshay Saxena:** I think if you asked us to run 3000 centres, I don't think we could do a good job. I really don't think we would, right? So I feel like, very, very large systems, very poorly staffed, especially at the administrative level and it's no one's fault at that point. It's too big, too complicated. The best of us would struggle.

[00:19:12] **Akshay Saxena:** The best of us do struggle when we attempt to try and fix these. And I think to build a culture of excellence and there's something, you know, I've seen at Avanti is that

the bar is held high, not by me or Vandana, right? The bar is eventually held high by the teacher and the program staff at the centre.

[00:19:28] Akshay Saxena: And there is variance even in our programs between one centre and another and the culture at one place and another, right? So I feel like building culture is essentially a decentralised process and public education is very centralised and that becomes barrier one.

[00:19:43] Akshay Saxena: And I think that we've tried all kinds of things. By we, I mean the sector, right? Like we've tried to do parent-teacher associations and many other things. I think it starts at the very top, right? Because it's not a politically viable thing to focus on, right?

[00:19:57] Akshay Saxena: Like, I think it's actually politically extremely viable to say, I am launching a network of now, 20 great schools, right? Which you didn't have before, or rebranding 20 not-so-great schools as now 20 to be great schools and because building culture takes so long, it's in no one's political interest to really invest in doing it, right? So I think in my mind, these are two really, really big factors.

[00:20:17] Akshay Saxena: And if you really want to have great schools, I think this needs to be broken down into smaller units. There need to be many other organisations that are well funded to do it, either by the government or by philanthropy.

[00:20:27] Akshay Saxena: And I think the private solution hasn't really worked well at the low price point, right? So I think it'll have to be high cost. Now with how we figure that out, and we've tried in India, we've had aided schools but who's holding, you know, to the start of this conversation like who's holding that bar high, right?

[00:20:44] Akshay Saxena: And, and who's letting the people who are slipping under the bar get away, right? And I think until there's public outcry about this, this is not going to really change.

[00:20:53] Rathish Balakrishnan: Vandana, anything from your side on the same question? If you had to do this for lakhs of schools?

[00:21:01] Vandana Goyal: I just want to echo what Akshay said, is we all struggle to do it at any sort of meaningful scale. It's really tough. I think it starts a little bit from the beginning of how aspirational it is to teach and this thing of, you know, the kids who can't do anything else, like, go to, you know, do your DEd or BEd and, you know, become a teacher. Like if you can't do anything else, right?

[00:21:25] Vandana Goyal: And it is an exceptionally difficult job to be a good teacher. It's not very hard to be a bad teacher but it's really tough to be a good one. And we talk a lot about respect and guru and all of these things, right? But do we really have a lot of respect for the profession?

[00:21:42] Vandana Goyal: And have we designed our system to demonstrate that respect, right? Do we have these kinds of conversations when someone joins their training to become a

teacher? Are we talking about what is it like to love your students, believe in your students? Do we even talk about that in our teacher education classes, right?

[00:22:03] Vandana Goyal: What does it mean to hold a high bar for them? How complex is it to teach these things? We don't do that, right? So we have this influx of people in the system who are looking at it, especially in the government system as job security, right? And a job that's like good for mothers, a lot of the time.

[00:22:22] Vandana Goyal: And antiquated teacher training system, where we just replicate what hasn't worked and then there's a system that just reinforces that, right? Because it's so gigantic. All they can do is push administrative procedure to get anything done, right?

[00:22:40] Vandana Goyal: It's just trial by, you know, resolutions and notices. Like we used to get in our schools and municipal schools, we just get notices, circulars, right? And that's what, you know, what determined what we did. Whether it was attendance or, like collecting some sort of data.

[00:22:56] Vandana Goyal: And this is where the time goes and many people have tried to change these things. It's exceptionally difficult to change them. Even one process, even one procedure, right? Which is why I think having models of excellence is really important in the system.

[00:23:13] Vandana Goyal: That was the idea of Akanksha. I think that's the idea of the Navodaya schools, right? Where you can really create outsized outcomes within the government system. But our dream when we started the schools was that what we're doing can actually be replicated in the rest of the system. But it's not so simple, right?

[00:23:33] Vandana Goyal: Like there's many, many structural reasons, systemic reasons that can happen, even when the will is there, right? And contrary to maybe public opinion, the will is there in many systems, right? There are many amazing politicians, bureaucrats who want that kind of transformation to happen.

[00:23:53] Vandana Goyal: And they've also struggled and met a lot of resistance, right? I guess we would answer that with a lot of humility of how difficult it is to create that change for lakhs of schools and students.

[00:24:05] Rathish Balakrishnan: I have one last question on this and I want to wrap it up because I have a lot of reflections, but I just want to ask this one question that keeps coming up, right?

[00:24:12] Rathish Balakrishnan: Everyone who gets vexed with this answer that we just gave. And this happens even in some of the more evolved boards of education organisations that I've met. And some of them, you know, where they step back and say, then why is the government running schools? We should just shut all government schools. Let just the private sector run all these schools, right?

[00:24:32] Rathish Balakrishnan: You know, why not? If small networks work, maybe a thousand flowers, maybe not a large system, but a thousand small flowers should solve the problem.

[00:24:40] Akshay Saxena: I think we've tried, I mean, so I think in the Avanti journey, I think we've tried this, right? We had a social enterprise for a while. We've tried to collect fees. And I think the simplest answer there is, kids just don't have enough money and kids need protection.

[00:24:53] Akshay Saxena: Maybe they don't need to run the schools, but they need to be deeply involved in this process. And that's something one has to figure out, but I think to imagine that the market cares more than the government, I think is really foolish. I think it's outrightly foolish, right?

[00:25:06] Akshay Saxena: Nobody, and I know this ecosystem now intimately, no one really cares for the child, right? The only people who really, I mean, in fact, the government cares more than most people for the benefit of kids because those kids and they eventually vote the politicians in and there's at least some, you know, at the end of the day, the politician does have to go back to their constituency and face the wrath of the population.

[00:25:28] Akshay Saxena: No private school owner has to, right? Because there's no accountability. So I feel walking away and just hoping that the market solves it is a little foolhardy. And I think we've done this as a sector. We've tried it and it's not worked.

[00:25:40] Akshay Saxena: And every now and then, it's so frustrating that we keep wanting to try it again. And no one in the world that I know of, has really solved this at scale. And this is going to sound very contrarian, maybe the answer is to not try and solve some of these things in scale, right?

[00:25:55] Akshay Saxena: Which is to acknowledge the fact that the best maybe we can manage as a first goal, is to have one great school in a district, that's achievable, that's in the thousands, that's not, you know, by population centre.

[00:26:08] Akshay Saxena: And I keep saying, I think this is something India knows how to do. We have done this, right? We've done this before. And the template is also there, which is you appoint good people, you do greenfield projects, you give them long runway and lots of money, and people are able to do this, right?

[00:26:26] Akshay Saxena: And we keep repeatedly under-investing in the models that are working and over-investing in stuff that isn't. Why are there not three times as many Navodayas, or why isn't there another Navodaya system? You can call it something else, right? But when we do it, when we set up KGBVs (Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya), when we set up tribal schools, why do we not fund them appropriately?

[00:26:43] Akshay Saxena: Their funding for budgets for infrastructure is much lower. Their budgets for teachers is lower, right? So when we have models at work, we choose consciously to go and do models that are going to be worse. And then we have so many bad schools that we

don't know how to fix them, right? So perhaps the answer is not to worry about solving for everyone immediately.

[00:27:05] Rathish Balakrishnan: Yeah. I'm going to bring this to a close and share some reflections. You know, I'm reminded as I'm listening to this in the famous quote from the movie by Pixar, right? Ratatouille. It says anyone can be a great cook. And it says, it's not that any rat can cook. It's just that you don't know where that great cook is going to come from. It can come from anywhere. And that's the final scene of the film.

[00:27:26] Rathish Balakrishnan: It's very similar to what we're talking. We don't know where great kids are going to come from. And it's not a function of a certain type of people where we can expect greatness from.

[00:27:35] Rathish Balakrishnan: And it's not just the maidans (grounds) of, you know, Mumbai, you know, you could get a Dhoni from anywhere. And designing for greatness, not as a law of averages, but as a way to identify and provide those opportunities for this distributed talent is very, very critical.

[00:27:51] Rathish Balakrishnan: And I think what we are showing through an example where we ran the schools in Akanksha or where JNV schools are set up, is that the model is possible. It can be done at a meaningful scale. It cannot work for every Indian child, but the model is possible.

[00:28:04] Rathish Balakrishnan: And what it requires is for us to invest in models at work rather than just solving for the law of averages in some form. And while there is an enduring effort in improving the law of averages incrementally, is there a way to sort of continue to overinvest in these models that can create some of these leaders?

[00:28:21] Rathish Balakrishnan: Because, and I think for me, the important part is a knock-on impact of such leaders and such children. It's just so much more, right? They solve then for many, many more people. And I think that is exceptionally important.

[00:28:32] Rathish Balakrishnan: And your example of the hedge fund manager is so, so prescient of that, right? He comes out of the system and then he creates a foundation that can enable many more children to be able to do this, which in some sense, that idea that I've improved maths by 4.2% by difference on difference, but no change on life outcomes is ever going to achieve, yeah?

[00:28:51] Rathish Balakrishnan: Building on what we just discussed; I want to maybe go deeper now on the how of what makes it happen. I think the first part, we made a case that, Hey, this is possible. In the second part, what makes it possible? You know, somebody listening to this conversation is hopefully inspired to say, "I want to do this." "I want to work with making great schools happen".

[00:29:09] Rathish Balakrishnan: What are the pieces that you believe makes that great? Like a couple of things we've already touched upon, which is, this system of care that we have to instil,

engaging parents is important, but if you reflect on your own journey, Akshay and Vandana, both in Avanti Fellows, and I know you've tried multiple models. We've been part of your journey as well. What has been your learning on what creates a system as a set of factors that enable excellence?

[00:29:33] Akshay Saxena: I think the biggest thing that makes a system is people. And I think like Vandana mentioned, look, the reality is that teaching and working in education is not something that people would choose easily, right?

[00:29:45] Akshay Saxena: So I feel like, and if you really look at what progress has been made, like you look at any of these systems, whether they're private systems, like an Akanksha school, a Navodaya system, private coaching centres, anything that you see which is working, it has required people to surrender some amount of privilege and commit to doing this.

[00:30:03] Akshay Saxena: And we have to, as society believes this is important enough, right? Like people who become IAS officers, I think we have many kinds, but I think the majority of the IAS officer might become IAS officers from a sense of service, right? And I, I think it's really, really important that people recognize this, that this stuff isn't going to change unless there is some desire to make, not sacrifice, but to commit yourself to this goal, as opposed to, you know, continuing to extend your lead over everyone else.

[00:30:30] Akshay Saxena: Because I think that's inherent to education disparities, that everyone just wants to have a longer lead and more gap between them and the next person. And I think when those people are in a system, and even if they're a small percentage, it starts to change the system quite a bit, right?

[00:30:42] Akshay Saxena: Because you can do the same question of like... you don't need every school to be great, but you don't know which school will be great, right? It's not correlated often beyond a certain threshold, even within the Navodayas or other schools that you see. It is often a particular principal or a particular teacher in the case of this rise competition.

[00:31:01] Akshay Saxena: Both the kids are from the same school because they have a great science teacher, right, who just made them use the adult tinkering lab that 50 other schools have, right? So I think having great people matters a lot. I think setting the bar high and the default it not being okay to not do well, I think really, really matters.

[00:31:19] Akshay Saxena: As you said, like you can't be okay with poor outcomes for poor people, right? You have to hold anything we do in the public system at the same bar as we would hold for our own kids. And these are our own kids. I mean, they're India's kids, right? Like these are kids that belong to us and I think that's the other one where, I think some of our historical baggage with there being different classes and it being someone's lot, I think plays into this.

[00:31:43] Akshay Saxena: And the last one it's just persistence and a lot of like doing a lot of work, small things really well repeatedly, right? As opposed to doing great, exciting, audacious things, which I think is another problem with how funding works, right?

[00:31:58] Akshay Saxena: Which is, the big audacious things often don't work. And often investing in those sometimes come and many times, comes at the cost of doing the same thing that is working incrementally for longer. So before we rebrand another set of schools or introduce tech, we've done RCTs which show negative effects of tech, right?

[00:32:16] Akshay Saxena: So it's really worth thinking like, is it worth, and I think Karthik on his podcast, his books, everything kind of points to this fact. And like, how do you just do the stuff that we know works well for longer? And how okay are we with being boring? I think it also matters.

[00:32:32] Rathish Balakrishnan: Yeah. Vandana, anything that you think should be added, because I'll tell you, and maybe I'll counter what Akshay is saying, is that well intentioned people working in education is actually... I mean, there are times where well-intentioned people working in education haven't delivered great outcomes too. You know, we've seen really smart people spend years and years and they change the narrative, but the outcomes haven't changed in a very significant way.

[00:32:56] Rathish Balakrishnan: So beyond good people, what else is required?

[00:33:01] Vandana Goyal: I think it's a little bit of low stakes accountability. So the accountability that exists in the system is the 10th boards essentially, right? And the 12th boards and you know, school leaving rate, right? Like joining rates, enrollment rates, things like that. That's basically what we hold ourselves accountable to.

[00:33:24] Vandana Goyal: The reason that those things are scary is because they are genuinely high stakes, right? Like when you go into a Navodaya school, the teachers care about their 10th and 12th boards, because that's what they're judged based upon. And so what if we one, removed a little bit of the judgement and talked about learning, right?

[00:33:44] Vandana Goyal: But we held a high bar, like Akshay was saying, to that learning. And that was something that the system takes seriously, right? So, for example, we used to take the ASSET by Educational Initiative. So it's a standardised test Akanksha schools used to take it across our grades, just to see how we compare to the best schools in the country.

[00:34:04] Vandana Goyal: Was there any sort of consequence of not doing well on that, in terms of firing teachers or saying that this school is not going to get a certain level of resource if they don't do as well, which is actually what happens in the United States right? You just take resources away from schools if they don't do well, right?

[00:34:21] Vandana Goyal: Things like that. So how do you take away the fear from that accountability so that people can actually see it as an opportunity to learn and improve? Like a

whole system can, right? In Mumbai, we have these beat officers, right? Like the BO (Beat Officer) would have a set of schools that they were responsible for.

[00:34:39] Vandana Goyal: Because there's so much administrative stuff, that's all they're able to focus on. What if you actually had a conversation about a diagnostic assessment and how the kids were doing and this is one place where I've actually shifted, which is that until you're confident that your system can perform, is there a more consistent set of tools that we can offer schools, from like the principal level down to teachers and social workers of this is like what good looks like and this is what you need to be doing until you're that Navodaya teacher who's using that Atal Tinkering Lab in a great way.

[00:35:23] Vandana Goyal: You have to do it this way, right? Like this is a great way to teach it. You know, lots of people have tried different great ways of teaching things. Here are a few good ways of teaching it. Here's your support, right? And I think we give antiquated textbooks, right? And all educators know how to do is move through each chapter of that textbook and ask the questions at the end of that text.

[00:35:46] Vandana Goyal: That's all you know how to do, right? And I don't think learning is going to change until you change the way kids learn, right? And I think between low-stakes accountability and the way that we teach, and the way that we understand learning shifts significantly, I'm not sure much will change in terms of what's happening in the classrooms.

[00:36:08] Rathish Balakrishnan: So one at the centre of excellent education is an excellent teacher. If that teacher does not believe in having a very high ambition for the child in committing to that process in a very intrinsic motivation way, not in a way which sort of seeks eccentric motivation, because then they will quit because there are so many things that are going to tell why this is not what they should be doing in their lives.

[00:36:29] Rathish Balakrishnan: Combine that with a culture of aiming for excellence at an organisational level. It could be a school thing. The school says, 'Hey, listen, this is where we got to be', which I think is another part. And the third thing, which Akshay, you talked about is doing boring, standard, proven micro practices every day in a consistent way, rather than saying, okay, what is that exceptional thing which we should do.

[00:36:55] Rathish Balakrishnan: I was in a meeting today and somebody said, what you are saying is not rocket science. Thank God it's not rocket science because I want to do this right? So what are those 'Thank God, it's not rocket science' practices that we need to have which we can just do over and over, over again?

[00:37:10] Rathish Balakrishnan: And four, Vandana, to your point, ensuring that the culture is both and that's the, it's an interesting contrast, right? You have to be excellence-focused, but you're not punitive if the excellence is not cheap, because a lot of our thinking around excellence is that if you don't get it, you're going to be fired.

[00:37:27] Rathish Balakrishnan: So there's so many sticks that I can hold for you, but saying, no, no, we're going to aim for excellence, but we're going to encourage the fact that it is going to be a long journey and most managers honestly don't know how to do that. Yeah, even in large professional organisations.

[00:37:41] Rathish Balakrishnan: And lastly, to the point on pedagogy, right? How do you enable learning in a manner that is not flipping a textbook? I think these are a lot of things that have to come together, you know, in terms of making this happen. I want to build on a couple of things that came up as you were talking.

[00:37:56] Rathish Balakrishnan: One, and I don't know if this is my bias and like I said, I'm also not good at this, right? The problem with excellent people is they don't like doing standard, boring micro practices stuff. It's, I don't know if it's, and that's what I'm saying. I'm honestly saying it's my bias too, because they're like, no, no, what is this beautiful idea? And it's probably fed with the movies that we watch, the books we read, the hero's journey, and the bad paradigm we have.

[00:38:22] Rathish Balakrishnan: And sometimes finding the talent model in a school where there is a set of people who just say, listen, I'm going to do this every day versus this teacher who has this high ambition, you know, the whole Dead Poets Society, Robin Williams type person with the regular teachers. I don't know if he have actually cracked the talent model thinking for a school as a unit as well. I don't know whether that resonates with you.

[00:38:48] Vandana Goyal: I was just going to say, I think that it also comes down to how we empower schools to celebrate that talent and recognize it, right? So it cannot be left, to Akshay's point earlier, right? Like, if you expect a system of thousands of schools to do that, how are they going to be able to do that, right?

[00:39:05] Vandana Goyal: There's going to be like a million issues that come up as a result. But if you tell every HM (headmaster) that you have, to identify who your exceptional teacher is. Have them, you know, teach it. What is stopping our systems from doing that? Who is saying no to doing that? But we are just never empowering a school leader, an HM to actually do that.

[00:39:27] Vandana Goyal: We are never telling them that you can celebrate excellence within your own school. I mean, you're not going to get a certificate. You may not get this, but this is an environment that you can create as a principal in your school, right? Yes, you have to do a lot of paperwork, but you can bring your team together.

[00:39:43] Vandana Goyal: You can say, "Hey, I saw this person doing this great thing, right?" My expectation is that all of us are doing this great thing. But we don't see those. And that's why I mean, the next step after we started our schools was to actually focus on principals. And to say, like, how do we actually develop that kind of leadership at the school level in a decentralised way?

[00:40:07] Vandana Goyal: And even in Avanti, the way we choose schools, right? The way we choose systems is the leaders. When we go into the Navodaya system, we first look at how open is this school leader. This principal is working with us, are they going to meet us halfway when we need them to do something for us?

[00:40:24] Vandana Goyal: So that I think perhaps giving a little bit of, you know, it's not even giving power, I would say it's just telling them that you can do this. And there was no consequence for not doing it or for doing it. I don't even think we are giving that much freedom to our leadership within the school system. And then it doesn't have to be a systemic solution. The systemic solution is let's empower great principals to do great things.

[00:40:55] Akshay Saxena: I think the pride in where you are matters, right? Like, I just feel like people are much happier doing the same task repeatedly if the place that they're doing it is a place they're proud of, right? And it is different because I think I was thinking about what you said.

[00:41:09] Akshay Saxena: And I was wondering, like, if I look at you know, many of my team members who've been around now for like 7-10 years and many of them, actually their lives haven't changed. They still live in the Navodaya school. They still, you know, manage teachers. But I think there's a lot of pride in the work, right?

[00:41:26] Akshay Saxena: And a sense of pride that perhaps even Vandana and I are too detached from now to really feel, right? Which is, and it should be easier with teaching, right? If your kids are having good outcomes. So I think it's all a little bit linked, right? If your kids are having great outcomes, then you know, right? You know that this child who I taught 8 or 10 years ago, showing up every morning and talking to this child at the same time had an impact on this child doing really, really well.

[00:41:49] Akshay Saxena: But if you're in a school system where no one succeeds, I don't know how, as a teacher, you convince yourself to keep doing the difficult things again and again, right? Like, so I do think the reverse is happening. I think, yes, teaching is something which is relatively easier to get into, but no longer, because every job in India that's a government job is hard to get into, right?

[00:42:10] Akshay Saxena: So these are, these people when they were in their 20s have, have, are probably ambitious people who worked really hard to be teachers and they probably did enjoy being a teacher for some period of time. But if they're in an environment which is constantly just failing at everything possible, how are they to build a sense of pride in doing their daily work, right?

[00:42:29] Akshay Saxena: I mean, we see this in the public sector undertakings. You see this everywhere, literally the same type of company, right? This one is a bank. The other is a bank. You know, one is a startup. The other one is a big corporation but people have very varying amounts of pride. And I wonder whether, you know, just is this place doing something that's

amazing or is this place doing something that's kick ass? Like, is that, is that what's motivating you to do boring things?

[00:42:50] Rathish Balakrishnan: Yeah, I know somebody who runs an organisation, I relate to both of these, right? One is to create this culture conversation. And we have a hundred people now. Earlier, it used to be that you bring everybody together, you know, you sort of tell a story. Now, every manager sets a culture of the team and it's all the same organisation, but they work differently because in that microcosm, there is somebody who sets a culture which then makes a difference.

[00:43:11] Rathish Balakrishnan: And the second is this whole flywheel of pride. When you feel like everything is going well, you have a more sense of pride. You have a sense of possibility. You do better. It gets better. And the moment, and the flywheel just takes off, right? And a lot of times, how do you keep the flywheel running in some sense for that to happen?

[00:43:27] Rathish Balakrishnan: I want to talk about another thing that you both didn't bring up, but comes up in every conversation, which I think philanthropy has a love-hate relationship with, which is infrastructure. We either over-invest in infrastructure, we just love the buses and at the same time, every study that says is that, hey, the infrastructure is poor, learning is anyway not happening, the labs are poor, et cetera. What is your own sense of infrastructure? I mean, the need for an investment in infrastructure.

[00:43:55] Vandana Goyal: See, great spaces do matter. I think that's one of my experiences. In Akanksha, we would go into the schools and, you know, the bathroom smell permeates down the hall, right? It's that whole broken window idea, right? That you just walk past broken things, like there would be like broken desks, broken chairs.

[00:44:16] Vandana Goyal: It's a sign of what Akshay was talking about pride, right? Like, do we have pride in this school? Do we have respect for the people in this school? If we had that pride, and if we had that respect, we would not put them into that environment to learn and teach all day long. We would not.

[00:44:37] Vandana Goyal: You need to have good sanitation, like, you know, well-lit buildings and things that work, desks and chairs and boards and things that work. Now, beyond that I don't think these fancy smart boards and all of these things, you know, they don't work. I don't think. And I think it's been proven also, but yeah.

[00:45:00] Vandana Goyal: That basic level of maintenance and upkeep of our schools, right? Like when the Delhi government, for example took over their schools, infrastructure was one of the first things that they just at least make sure that they feel nice.

[00:45:16] Vandana Goyal: And the point was that I want to be proud to go to this school, right? Like, why aren't parents proud? Parents are often embarrassed to have their kids wear the government school uniform, right? Why? Because for them, it's like a sign that they can't afford something else. So how do you actually make it a symbol of pride to wear that uniform?

[00:45:39] Vandana Goyal: And these are the things that people see. So they do matter. And it's just like that inspirational person inside the classroom making it happen irrespective of, you know, like those very glorifying movies that we see about that one teacher who makes it happen anyway.

[00:45:56] Vandana Goyal: Yeah, that happens, but that's not the point. There are hundreds of millions of kids in these schools, right? So, the least we can do is to create just some basic level of pride in the actual building that they're going to school in, right? Like, I'm excited to go, like it's a, it's a safe and happy place to be in.

[00:46:17] Akshay Saxena: I mean, the only thing I'd add is that ownership of space also matters, so do kids feel like they own the space? Do they have freedom of movement in a space? But I'll echo what Vandana said. I think it's not how fancy it is. Just like if you can just do the bare bones, but do them, do them well, I think it's fine.

[00:46:33] Rathish Balakrishnan: Yeah. So one last question on this before we wrap this up. You know what? You said something interesting, Vandana, when we talked about earlier saying, Hey, when you walk into a school, you see whether there is a school leader who is sort of seeing the sense of possibility in the work that you have to do.

[00:46:51] Rathish Balakrishnan: And I'm thinking about the relationship between a civil society organisation and the government here, right? And there are things that the government has to enable and the civil society organisation can act, in some sense, providing the essential functional infrastructure, ensuring that there is a leader in the school who has a sense of possibility, ensuring that there are functional practices to run the school, I think, is what the school should bring, which you can't sort of create.

[00:47:18] Rathish Balakrishnan: If this is not available, just the right to entry in some sense is missing. What are you then being able to add that then creates, and when I speak about you and I just don't mean Avanti Fellows, but you know, in your experience, what is that civil society is able to add that then creates that added value, which makes that one plus one equal to one?

[00:47:39] Vandana Goyal: I think certainly resources to do things that the government system does not have the resources to do. And when you think about what are those resources, right? We are small organisations that have money for very specific things, right? And so what is that specific thing that can really add value, right, to the learning of those students

[00:48:01] Vandana Goyal: I think some institutions are set up to actually come in and, like, work with the system and look at the efficiency of its administrative procedures and all of that. But putting that aside, we probably have a small, relatively small team in the scope of a government system, right?

[00:48:20] Vandana Goyal: That can be held highly accountable. We have freedom to hire and fire. We can pay at our discretion. And we can find people because it's a small number who have

a very specific set of skills, right? And you just need to decide, I think, as an organisation is what is that unique set of competencies that will truly add value to this system.

[00:48:45] Vandana Goyal: And so, like, I think one of the reasons I was so compelled by what Avanti does when I first met Akshay in 2019 was because I was like, this is something that the system, even if it wants to do, cannot do, right? Like, because there's, there's so many reasons or it can, but, you know, there's a lot of challenges and making this happen in a systemic manner.

[00:49:06] Vandana Goyal: But if we can come in and say, like, look, this is a value-added service. You may not have the funds to run, say, a program for your academically advanced students, but we will come in and do that. We will teach you how to do it. We will allow you to actually do that at some reasonable scale by yourself.

[00:49:26] Vandana Goyal: We will set up those systems for you, right? And then we will come in at the last mile and teach the kids who truly don't have any other place to go. They can't afford the coaching. The government can't set up a coaching centre. We will do that.

[00:49:40] Vandana Goyal: And I think the outsized, you know, impact that you've mentioned a few times comes from that very clear focus on that specific thing that you're trying to do.

[00:49:53] Vandana Goyal: Now, that's the Avanti case. But I think like, for an organisation for civil society to actually think about it in that way, it has to come also from a place of, you know, and this is something that I think it's learned over time, you know, as soon as you're responsible for that many schools, you're not going to be good at teaching kids how to read either, you know?

[00:50:14] Vandana Goyal: So like, how do you actually figure out that okay, but we can give them this one tool about how kids can learn how to read. And if we teach them this one tool, strategy, whatever it is, resource, and we train everyone on how to use it, that can actually create a shift, right? So, but what is that? I'm just giving you some random examples, but I think it's very powerful in the Avanti context, because we're serving a subset of kids in that classroom recognizing that we cannot serve all right?

[00:50:46] Vandana Goyal: And I think that's like, the challenge for us sometimes because what we're doing is not a systemic solution in terms of serving each and every child. But what it is, is equity, in our view, because it's giving those kids what they need to realise their potential.

[00:51:03] Vandana Goyal: So can we come in and say like I think arts programs do that you know like Akshay's earlier point, if you want to be an artist in this school, right? Is there anything that will help identify you and develop that talent?

[00:51:16] Vandana Goyal: Unless you're of exceptional ability where you just figure it out on your own. So can we actually think of ourselves not as the replacement of the system, but as this kind of unique supplement to what they're doing. And then I think the relationship between government and civil society changes, right?

[00:51:37] Vandana Goyal: Because, like, our relationship, I think, as, you know, for the most part is very positive. We work with many governments, many different political parties, right? And it's agnostic of that. All of them want this for their students, right? And feel a sense of pride when their students achieve and when we come in and say, we will give you what you need, right? And then we will give, you know, provide that with the resources we're able to do. There's also a lot of appreciation for that.

[00:52:04] Vandana Goyal: And that I think is something I've learned a lot from Akshay and how he approaches these relationships and from our work and what I would encourage any organisation listening, to think about for themselves.

[00:52:18] Akshay Saxena: And I think it's also important to approach working with the government with some humility, right? I think, and this is something I did when I was early in my journey as well. Like I keep likening it to startups and big tech companies and other such things. It's very easy when you don't know what it is to run something large to come in and just like, you know, think it's just a bunch of really foolish people who don't know what they're doing, right?

[00:52:45] Akshay Saxena: Because you just are completely blind to the challenges that they have. And I think once you recognize that you will probably be an expert at doing one very specific thing as an organisation. And you make the effort to say I'm really good and you're open to criticism.

[00:53:04] Akshay Saxena: But I think for many, many years, we were told to our face, right? Like your content is not as good as Akash and Allen and this and that. And my kids are still leaving, even though Avanti's... which is true. Like it isn't right. It won't be, we aren't investing as much money, but I think that's also okay.

[00:53:20] Akshay Saxena: And I feel like if we were to turn around and say, no, it's not. And you know, so and so from Harvard and Stanford has looked at it. And I've done that. I mean, in the past, right, I just feel like you learn over time that these are relationships of trust and not really relationships where we are better or smarter or are we just in it together, right?

[00:53:41] Akshay Saxena: And we just figure out a way to do things for kids. And I think focusing on children matters. I think having conversations with the government about their children and our children matters much more than having conversations about, you know, their operations and their systems. And I think it really matters once you start doing it.

[00:53:57] Akshay Saxena: And I've seen this with many people who do this very successfully. You are not as high touch programming, right? Where you talk about the kids. It's very hard to find an adult who does not care about kids. Like it's a pretty high bar.

[00:54:09] Rathish Balakrishnan: That's going to be hard to find. I'm going to summarise this as we come to the end of this section, right?

[00:54:15] Rathish Balakrishnan: One is make sure that the school has essential infrastructure. Essential functional infrastructure, where it doesn't have to be jazzy, but it shouldn't be

something that just moves people away from saying this is some, there is something that good can, that can happen off of this place. That's number one.

[00:54:31] Rathish Balakrishnan: Second is fix the talent model, which is that find the people who have the sense of purpose and pride in doing the things that are everyday things very, very well and combine that with these people who bring this massive sense of ambition, massive sense of possibility that can work together to be able to get the talent model, right?

[00:54:52] Rathish Balakrishnan: Three, ensure that the engagement with the parents is successful. Make sure that they're co-opted. They are partners in this process of change. Infrastructure talent model actually contributes to that because then they said, have a sense of possibility and what is possible for their own children. And at the same time, make them see how they can be actual partners in making this happen. That's the third pillar.

[00:55:12] Rathish Balakrishnan: Fourth is to create that approach for learning, which essentially is engaging, it's not flipping books and all of that. And the fifth part is to create the culture where the focus is. Actually, on learning and growing and setting our ambitions and getting us far, not punitive in a way where we hold people accountable for every mistake, in which case, one of the IAS officers said this is that, you know, I have greater incentive to not do anything than to succeed, right?

[00:55:42] Rathish Balakrishnan: Because when I try and succeed, there's a greater risk that I carry. And finally, which is the point you're adding, is to find that catalytic capability that the system will always find it hard to have. You know, add scale and add that catalytic capability that makes all of this work 10x.

[00:55:59] Rathish Balakrishnan: Is that catalytic capability being the advocate for the child? Is that catalytic capability a way of bringing in a curriculum that will help them? Is this catalytic capability the worldview of what is happening outside that can be integrated into the school? Is that catalytic capability a person who just cares a little bit more and coordinates, and it reduces the transaction friction of running something as effective as this?

[00:56:20] Rathish Balakrishnan: What is that catalytic capability? You put this all together and pray, I think there's a chance that we make it happen to run a school of excellence. Is that a fair, fair summary?

[00:56:32] Akshay Saxena: Yeah.

[00:56:32] Vandana Goyal: Yeah. Great. Solved

[00:56:35] Rathish Balakrishnan: Excellent.

[00:56:36] Vandana Goyal: Solved it.

[00:56:39] Rathish Balakrishnan: That's it. That's all we need. That's what we do in this podcast. We solve complex problems. You know, it's so easy to talk about, very hard to do but I want to

now make this a little bit more nuanced and talk about something I know both of you care about.

[00:56:56] Rathish Balakrishnan: So far, our conversation has been a very gender-agnostic conversation. It assumes that the same set of challenges apply for boys and the same set of challenges apply for girls, but we know that's not true. Our own research at the Sattva Knowledge Institute tells us that at grade two level, the same girl is vastly better than the boy on maths.

[00:57:17] Rathish Balakrishnan: Grade five, they get to the same level, by grade eight or nine, the girl starts to want to perform. And be it classroom participation, be it sense of possibility, all of what we talked about, be it even parental norms around what is possible for their child. We are dealing with vastly different worlds. How do you make a school of excellence work for girls?

[00:57:38] Rathish Balakrishnan: And maybe before we get to the solution and then I know you care passionately about this, maybe you can get started. What are some of the problems that we're actually facing when solving these problems for girls?

[00:57:49] Vandana Goyal: Akshay and I care equally, first of all. And I have some anecdotes about how he's demonstrated that. But since I'm the girl, I'll talk first. We talk about this a lot. But I also did not, when I was running Akanksha, I did not think differently about our girls and boys.

[00:58:07] Vandana Goyal: You know, I'll be honest. Like I, I thought about all of our kids and I never really saw it through a gender lens. We were thinking about all of the kids. I really didn't think of the way that we approach them in the schools and that the intervention actually needs to be different for them, to create equity for them.

[00:58:25] Vandana Goyal: And I guess part of my own personal life journey, which I've shared with some, I think I went from like a very equal family upbringing in the US, where I never felt I was any different from my brother. Societally, there were really never any messages, I guess, that I couldn't do things that my brother could.

[00:58:50] Vandana Goyal: And then over time, as I lived in India, I saw very different things happening. In my own extended family, I see a lot of women who I think have so much potential in so many different ways, right? And who are very constrained, by just their environments, the people's lack of expectations for them beyond just basics like home care, childcare.

[00:59:16] Vandana Goyal: And it's just started to bother me a lot on a personal level. And I felt like the reason I was a little bit protected as an individual from some of that, is because I have always worked and I've always earned my own money. It sounds really simple and basic, but I think it just gives me a level of confidence and security that I can take care of myself.

[00:59:39] Vandana Goyal: Like, I mean, now I'm married in a partnership, like it's not, everything is not equal, but I know that if I had to, I could take care of myself financially and not just

emotionally. And I think that the root of power for girls and young women is to know that you can take care of yourself no matter what, right?

[01:00:02] Vandana Goyal: I can take care of my own needs, whether it is to put a roof over my head, food in my mouth, in my kid's mouth, educate myself, work, right? I can do those things. So yes, you always need support, but I can do it. I did not realise how much girls are affected by these expectations, lack of expectations for them, right? Or different expectations for them. And so when we started, I just started asking simple questions. I mean, the first time I met Akshay, I said, I'm really interested in doing this work for girls and for young women. I just think it's pathetic that the female participation in the workforce in India is 20%.

[01:00:43] Vandana Goyal: I think it is like, I mean, just imagine if you increase that by 10%, how things would change, right? I mean, forget about full participation. And that's what I came to Akshay with. That was the problem I wanted to think about and it's like, let's figure out how to do this for girls.

[01:00:58] Vandana Goyal: And so we started looking at our own data. Forget about public data and we saw massive inequity in outcomes. We had an equal number of girls and boys. But when you look at how many kids are getting into IITs, of which gender, how many kids are qualifying on the JEE, right?

[01:01:17] Vandana Goyal: How many girls are accessing the best colleges? How many girls continue to work after they complete college? On all of those metrics, right? Our girls were under-performing. But when you think about how, it's like your earlier example, of like, it's not about teaching that algebra problem better. It's not about throwing more academic solutions at this problem.

[01:01:40] Vandana Goyal: If that same girl is outperforming, you know, in elementary school or primary school, then it is not about her cognitive ability, right? Somewhere along the way, she is being told silently, implicitly, by her parents, her community, her school, that maths and science is not something that she is meant to be good at, right?

[01:02:06] Vandana Goyal: There is not an expectation that she is, you know… yes, go get educated, but it's not an expectation or assumption that you are going to work after you finish college, right? That you will continue to work after you get married, after you have kids, and that there is a society out there who will support you, because it's not the case. It's just not the case.

[01:02:28] Vandana Goyal: That's not the world that our girls are going into, right? And they need to have a lot of internal strength, right? And they need to have allies that they can identify around them. Even if it's not a parent, if it's a mentor, if it's a cousin, if it's a teacher, they, you need to have some sort of advocate, right?

[01:02:47] Vandana Goyal: And you need to have some sort of example, right? I mean, some of these girls do it without an example and then they become the example. We see that with our alumni. and that example is extremely important when a girl sees me, they're going to say, well,

you know, you have this American accent and you grew up in a privileged environment that I can't understand or relate to, but when they see their own self, right, you know, going out and whether it's working on a factory floor or designing a product or working in an office or leaving home and going to college, even that step is huge for them, right?

[01:03:25] Vandana Goyal: And so a lot of this work is mindset-related, right? And it's building that agency in the girls through exposure to role models, right? Through showing them that girls are actually, you know, intuitively made to design things. Because we are handling so many things all the time, right? We are caregivers, we are taking care even as young girls, right?

[01:03:55] Vandana Goyal: As much as I say I grew up in a gender-neutral environment, my mom used to say, well, you know, Vandana, go help aunty in the kitchen. So you're always made and pushed to think about others and think about what's happening around you. And that makes us uniquely positioned to make the world a better place.

[01:04:16] Vandana Goyal: And a lot of that making the world a better place happens through technology and engineering and design. Product design, right? And so how do you actually help girls see themselves in that way, you know?

[01:04:30] Vandana Goyal: I mean, our biggest thing is that even when girls are good at science, they think they should be doctors. Why? Because it's more girly, feminine, right? So I think this is one aspect of work that is very complex, in terms of what the solution looks like. We haven't figured out what it is, but we're starting to see shifts in our own results just as a result of talking about it.

[01:04:57] Vandana Goyal: Last year, we had 1 out of 35 kids who went on to IITs, was a girl. This year, I believe it's 29%, Akshay, right? Yeah, who are girls who are going on to IITs. And I mean, we set up centres of excellence just focused on girls, right? Like that's basically where those numbers came from.

[01:05:17] Vandana Goyal: And we talk about it all the time, right? And so it's very intentional action. And creating environments where girls can thrive. It has to be that. And I think every educator, even if what you're doing is not only girls focused, needs to do it. And that's how we'll see change happen. Sorry, that was a very long answer. I, as you said, feel that passionately about this.

[01:05:39] Rathish Balakrishnan: Akshay, anything you want to add? I have a couple of follow-throughs, but would love to hear your thoughts.

[01:05:43] Akshay Saxena: Yeah. So I think, just to build on that, on the question of what's holding them back. And it's shocking how much, kind of, I call it tongue-in-cheek research. Because no one really wants to say it, "Oh, girls are just not interested in systems. They're more interested in whatever, caregiving".

[01:06:03] Akshay Saxena: So there's a lot of like, lazy science, right? On causation correlation problems with, with why girls are doing this. And I think what's actually been striking to me is

how much of that the girls themselves believe. And it's very easy to fall into like this affirmation of like, this is what society is saying.

[01:06:18] Akshay Saxena: This is what people are saying. This is what my teacher said and how sensitive it is, which is all it takes is one person saying something at some point, right? And you're already shattered. It is not academic. It's very clear it's not academic, right? Which is that, like the girls and the boys. And if you look at not in our data, right, like the girls and the boys, the beginning of 11th do just as miserably at physics.

[01:06:38] Akshay Saxena: Like everyone sucks but the boys recover, right? Like over time they recover, but the girls don't, right? They just keep getting worse. And so, it is clearly like Vandana was saying, like an attitude, mindset, environment issue. You ask any of our alums once they're a little bit older, you know, in the 24-25, what did you think about the JNV environment?

[01:06:59] Akshay Saxena: The only negative thing I hear consistently is, "We had no freedom. We were hemmed in the hostel. We weren't allowed to study at night". And these things matter, right? Like if you're really aspiring for these like edge case outcomes. So yeah, that's the only thing I want to reiterate. And it's clearly not academic.

[01:07:17] Rathish Balakrishnan: Yeah. So recently, I was talking to the head of one of the most premier institutions in India. And we were talking about how the number of girls in the college is actually dwindling year on year. And we were talking about what do you think is the cause and what should make it happen and his immediate response, and this is an engineering college, he said, maybe we should start some liberal arts programs. Maybe girls don't like engineering.

[01:07:43] Rathish Balakrishnan: And I'm like, you are the head of the institution of an engineering institution. You have had decades of women leaders coming out of your organisation. Why would you imagine that liberal arts is actually the solution to the problem?

[01:07:57] Rathish Balakrishnan: Vandana, I think you made a very, very important point around girls looking at the way the world is built and hence science, technology, et cetera, being a part of it and how that is not just feminised roles like doctors and nurses alone. Is there something that we can do to accelerate more girls to look at STEM specifically?

[01:08:18] Rathish Balakrishnan: One of the points that you made is that just a keen eye on the problem is going to make it better. But are there other things that you believe is going to be important for us to get more girls interested?

[01:08:27] Vandana Goyal: I think two things that we're experimenting with right now. I think one is they need to see women doing this work. Even if it's 13% of women who are in IITs, who are going on to do this work, there are still 13% of them out there being engineers who we can connect them to, who have persevered through even more challenging circumstances, right? And through an even more difficult time, right?

[01:08:54] Vandana Goyal: And incredible engineers and scientists, like female scientists and engineers across the country. I've met many of them and talked to many of them, just incredible

women. So introducing and connecting those generations, and giving them role models. Both aspirational ones as well as more proximate ones, right? You know, the alumni from their schools who are just a few years older, who are going on to work, who are getting great job offers. So I think that this whole aspect of exposing them to women who they can relate to and aspire to be.

[01:09:30] Vandana Goyal: The second, I think is, is part of, and this is probably going to be a debate that is never really resolved, but if women truly, are somewhere innately or intuitively designed to think about community, right? And society and about relationships and keeping those bonds, right?

[01:09:50] Vandana Goyal: How do you connect that right? Like the work of science and engineering. To the improvement of something, the quality of something, right? And so giving them hands-on experience with science and technology and engineering from a young age, and being able to solve problems using those tools, I think ignites a certain interest.

[01:10:15] Vandana Goyal: And enthusiasm to persevere through some of these challenges. I think like one of the reasons, Akshay was talking about how they're all bad at physics, right? But the boys persevere through it. And, and the girls do not, they lose interest, right?

[01:10:30] Vandana Goyal: And I think if you are able to sustain interest that maybe already existed, but you're able to sustain that before it kind of drops off, then they will also persevere through more difficult and boring content. So I think those, those 2 things and I do think that this is where organisations like ours can really add value to government systems is identifying those girls who have the interest and the talent, right? Earlier on and saying, we will help keep those girls on track.

[01:11:02] Vandana Goyal: I think that's an amazing value-add that we can provide to the system and actually supporting those girls and because it's a lot of like, you need to talk to their parents, right? You need their parents to support them going to college, right? So it's a multifaceted kind of approach, I think, with the girls. It's not like this one thing that you can do.

[01:11:25] Rathish Balakrishnan: And you know, I mean, I want to build on what you said, Vandana, because when we did the research around girls in STEM, We sort of broke it down into three parts and some of it we touched as we speaking. One, we realised that stem has a challenge which is gender agnostic, which is really that if there's poor infrastructure, which we talked about, or if there is a sense of, you know, no, no sense of excitement around teaching science, because yeah, We all know science can be very boring if you teach it poorly.

[01:11:54] Rathish Balakrishnan: That is going to affect boys and girls equally. And I think that as a country, we need to solve for. The second part of it, which you spoke now, is that there are gender-accentuated challenges. I do believe even boys don't have sufficient role models in many contexts as well. But just the probability of finding one is higher, right?

[01:12:12] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** With the same thing that affects the girl much more because it says that the number of road models that they see of, you know, people that they can emulate is lesser, even though the problem may be the same. Another idea that, you know, or the other cause that we have seen, which is something that I want to come back to as a question is differential spending by parents too, which is that if you have that one tuition that you can spend for a child, then spend that for the boy and not for the girl.

[01:12:39] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** And that one tuition makes a big difference. Akshay, you were saying in the edge cases, if you have that one subscription that you can get to one phone that you can get access to, and there are, and this is not one sledgehammer investment of a few lakhs for a college. This is a thousand cuts. 5000, 6000, 2000, 9000 rupees that you just slice their ambitions off. And if you can make that micropayment happen, you can solve the problem a lot more and get them to actually make choices.

[01:13:06] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** And the third part of it, which is really the gender-specific conversation that we are having around norms and expectations that people have of girls, you know, and how, if you don't shift that, all of this works within that limited imagination that everybody's creating for the girl.

[01:13:21] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** Just to, I mean, and you know, a lot of what we talked about infrastructure, teachers, imagine the way pedagogy should happen, career counselling, role modelling. I think we've touched upon, I just want to build on that micro-financial aid conversation as well. Is this something that you're seeing in your work as well, that these thousand small cuts of where you will not spend for a girl being having that accumulated accrued impact on the girl.

[01:13:45] **Akshay Saxena:** So I think we see almost a counterfactual more often than not, which is that It's very clear what is common to the parents of the girls who are able to participate, right, because that's often the kids we interact with more. And I think everything you're saying actually does happen, right?

[01:14:03] **Akshay Saxena:** I think very, very, very, very commonly the girls who are succeeding, and I think here the Navodayas are perhaps not the best testing. The state programs are, you know, where we're getting these kids online.

[01:14:14] **Akshay Saxena:** And we will consistently find that the girls will have supportive parents. Plural, right? Like they'll make some investments and let them, you know, there's almost, we've never seen a case where the data plan is getting stopped or taken away from the girl, but we do see this in other programming, right?

[01:14:30] **Akshay Saxena:** So I think we definitely see what is common and what is common is the parents wanting to invest in their child. And we almost see zero children. I mean, not almost, we see zero girls who are able to participate in the Avanti program by the parents aren't aligned.

[01:14:43] **Vandana Goyal:** Just adding to that, I think the reason that the girls are in online programming is because their parents sent their son to a private school or to private coaching, which is physical and offline. And that's what they have access to, which is why I think in our online programming, we have more girls enrol than boys because this is their option.

[01:15:05] **Vandana Goyal:** And I think that's, that's one piece of it. And I think that the other is that when it comes to college choice, right? And we've seen a handful of examples like this, when it comes to leaving home, like going outside of your district or your state, right?

[01:15:20] **Vandana Goyal:** Parents are not ready to send their daughters and that is a critical choice, right? If you get into an IIT or NIT or any NIRF college, right, that's outside of your home state, you should take it, right? Like, I mean, it's objectively true that you will get a better career option if you go to that college.

[01:15:44] **Vandana Goyal:** It's very important that they take that choice, but there's many times when girls actually take a drop year so that they can take the test again so that they can get a college close to their home. So I do think that there is a little bit of this, like, death by a thousand cuts.

[01:16:04] **Vandana Goyal:** We have an equal number of boys and girls in our programming. So, yes, their parents are supporting them at that level. But there are these choices that are being made for them, right? That really has an outsized influence on the quality of job that they get, right?

[01:16:25] **Vandana Goyal:** How much money they're earning and whether or not they stay in work. Because if a girl ends up going to a local college in their district and takes a BSc course, she's very likely not to work at all, but especially post-marriage and post children, whereas an engineer is 3 times as likely to work as a regular graduate.

[01:16:48] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** And if you look at it, the number of girls in BSc programs have increased steadily in the country, but the stark difference in engineering colleges continues to remain. And, you know, sometimes I think that we talk about norms a lot, but one way to solve the norms is to just make a lot of cases and treat it as a long game.

[01:17:05] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** But when you find these strategic cuts, these thousand cuts and fix them one by one, I think just the overton window shifts over a period of time, right? Because it is a much easier way to make these small decisions change. And saying, no, no, the girls have to be seen differently because there's just no way of operating that strategy effectively, I feel.

[01:17:26] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** But one girl escapes, gets at escape velocity, then 10 girls go. And to make that one goal go, you just have to fix a thousand cuts, right? And not this larger societal change that we hope. We'll make it happen at scale.

[01:17:38] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** I just want to quickly summarise what we discussed. Akshay and Vandana and thanks for being such wonderful guests.

[01:17:45] Rathish Balakrishnan: Yeah. So one, is like we said, I think, everyone, including me, fundamentally believes that if there's one investment that can take a family out of intergenerational poverty, it is education. Our life stories, stories of people we know, all convince, tell us that this outsize jump is not going to happen by buying a home, buying a Buffalo. It's going to happen by investing in education.

[01:18:07] Rathish Balakrishnan: Unfortunately, while we've convinced the country about it, we are not building the systems that actually result in that outcome of outsized education. Impact on intergenerational poverty happens through our education system. While we play the long game on improving the system for everyone, I think we shouldn't wait to solve and create opportunities for those, who are across the country today in fairly difficult environments who have a chance to achieve that escape velocity.

[01:18:34] Rathish Balakrishnan: And designing for that system is not the design that's going to help every child in India. It is going to be a school that actually can work in every district that can actually make this happen for children and a system that signals it strong enough so that children who have that possibility and have that enabling environment can get there.

[01:18:50] Rathish Balakrishnan: Building the school as we talked about has those layers. It has to have that essential infrastructure, the talent model, the culture of possibility, the engagement with the parents and the steady routines and that catalytic value. It's not just that it's easy to say, but we know that this can actually happen and we've demonstrated that it is possible.

[01:19:10] Rathish Balakrishnan: And I think investing in this is important and doing this with a lens that ensures that it is gendered in the view that it has is critical, because it is not that every child gets the same opportunity. There are distinct disadvantages girls battle with just in terms of their own view of themselves, their parents' view of themselves, the societal norm around what they can or cannot do.

[01:19:32] Rathish Balakrishnan: And as we talked about a thousand cuts in terms of when can you study? When do you have to go back to the hostel? Can you spend on that subscription? Can you go to that private tuition, et cetera? And if he can get enough number of girls to demonstrate, like you've done with 19% girls, winning it, quitting to 35%, then the 35% to 70% becomes a lot easier because then that system, the flywheel in some sense kicks off.

[01:19:55] Rathish Balakrishnan: And the question that we're leaving for everybody is probably of two kinds. For those who are actually about education, which including my own 14 year old son, is a lot of people, how can they look at this issue of creating excellence everywhere as a problem that they want to solve for? Because there is need for a lot more entrepreneurial action, but more importantly, for every new philanthropist who's entering India now and investing in education and thinking about this, can they make a case for investing in excellence, investing in STEM for girls and investing in making those role models happen because the outsized impact of that is going to be far more significant.

[01:20:32] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** Thank you so much for being here. It's been a fast and fascinating conversation. I hope everyone enjoys it as much as the three of us did.

[01:20:40] **Akshay Saxena:** We had a great time. We'll see.

[01:20:44] **Vandana Goyal:** We had a great time. That's what matters.

[01:20:45] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** Exactly. Mission accomplished.

[01:20:48] **Akshay Saxena:** Yeah.

[01:20:49] **Akshay Saxena:** Thank you so much, Rathish, for having us.

[01:20:50] **Vandana Goyal:** Yeah, thank you.

[01:20:51] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** Thank you guys. Thanks so much.

[01:20:52] **Rathish Balakrishnan:** Thank you for listening to this episode of Decoding Impact, a Sattva Knowledge Institute production. I'm your host, Rathish Balakrishnan, co-founder and managing partner at Sattva Consulting. If you liked this conversation, head on to our Sattva Knowledge Institute web portal for more knowledge articles and publications.

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