Dr. Govindappa Venkataswamy: Reimagining eye care in the third world—From provincial to planetary

Give people a new experience, one that deeply changes their lives, make it affordable, and eventually you change the whole world. And your customers become your marketers.

Dr. G Venkataswamy
Founder, Aravind Eye Care System

Dr Govindappa Venkataswamy, affectionately referred to as Dr V by his admirers, has transformed Aravind eye care system into a replicable model for providing affordable eye care to all in need. His visionary leadership enabled Aravind to provide affordable eye care services by diligently pruning the costs of operations, with no compromise of quality of outcomes or patient experience. Dr V kept cost of providing eye care low by building an efficient, high-volume assembly line process to examine patients or perform surgeries by minimizing waste. Every step ranging from patient registration, examination, to surgery was standardized and optimized, which helped to improve efficiency while achieving optimal clinical outcomes. This remains key to Aravind’s operating model of sustainable eye care delivery.

When Dr V began his proverbial 11 bedded eye clinic in 1976, little did anyone realize that his model of self-sustainable eye care model would one day become globally acclaimed for the way eye care can be effectively delivered, to those at the bottom of the economic pyramid. Aravind eye care system founded by him along with Dr. P. Namperumalsamy, Dr. G. Natchiar, and other family members [Fig. 1] is not only an equitable health care model but also a business case study taught in several management schools around the world. Aravind is not only financially self-reliant but also generates a healthy surplus, despite providing close to 60% of its services either free or at steeply subsidized cost. This financial self-reliance has helped the organization to continually upgrade its patient care services with the best of available technology and also expand its service area through establishing facilities at different geographical locations.

Dr V’s relentless pursuit of his vision is fundamentally the driving force behind Aravind’s evolution as one of the largest eye care providers. Its reach now encompasses education of ophthalmologists and allied healthcare personnel, training, research, and manufacturing of low-cost ophthalmic supplies to facilitate cost-effective eye care solutions to the underprivileged communities. His passion for continuous improvement and leverage technology and advances in medical sciences ensured Aravind’s leaders to constantly review the progress and performance of the organization in terms of the market demands.

Conventional community outreach eye camps and provision of free eye care services to direct walk in patients in the base hospitals were pivotal to Aravind’s mission of reaching everyone who need eye care in the initial years. A study done in collaboration with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine revealed that only 7% of those in felt need of eye care actually accessed it through the outreach eye camps. To improve its reach, Dr V prevailed upon his senior colleagues Dr. Namperumalsamy and Mr. Thulasiraj to innovate models so as to ensure easier access to primary eye care for those in the remote rural households. This eventually led to Aravind’s

Figure 1: Dr Venkataswamy with the founding members of Aravind (From left to right): Dr G Natchiar, Mr Thulasiraj Ravilla, Dr P Vijayalakshmi, Dr M Srinivasan, Dr P Namperumalsamy, and Mr G Srinivasan
Dr Venkataswamy’s vision to address the challenge of avoidable blindness reflected his deep rooted compassion and empathy for the fellow men and women. To him, no one in the world should remain needlessly blind. The global magnitude of blindness shaped his world view approach as he recognized that Aravind’s contribution alone would not be able to address the problem that was global in scale. He believed that the real impact lay in replication of Aravind eye care model in the developing countries with high burden of blindness and visual impairment. His far sighted aspirations aligned Aravind’s work with a much broader effort making it one of the most prolific contributors to a global combat against blindness.[1] With assistance from the Lions’ International, he set up the Lions Institute of Community Ophthalmology (LAICO), Aravind’s training and consultancy institute, with a mission to replicate Aravind model globally. In a little over three decades, LAICO had engaged in capacity building work of over 365 hospitals from 29 countries in an attempt to transform them into productive eye hospitals and trained over 6000 eye care professionals from 69 countries. LAICO’s partnering with various eye hospitals and providing them the know-how and a system approach for delivering high volume, high-quality, and cost-effective eye care have resulted in adding close to 1 million additional surgeries yearly.

Even early on, Dr V realized that the scope of his mission was too large to be accomplished by few people. Developing people by realizing their full potential, inspiring and motivating them to grow their competencies was a passion for him. He had an innate gift of prescience that led him to see in people lot more than what they themselves saw in them and guided each of them to reach their levels of competence, transforming them as an instrument to help him accomplish his mission. Mr Thulasiraj, the first ever eye care administrator and later the head of LAICO, and Professor V Srinivasan, a retired college teacher of Physics who pioneered the in-house equipment maintenance at Aravind that became one of the most sought-after courses by eye hospitals, are but a few examples. In a similar vein, Dr V foresaw the pivotal role mid-level ophthalmic personnel could assume in ensuring efficient and cost-effective care and motivated his younger sibling, Dr Natchiar, to recruit and train young rural women to complement ophthalmologists. If anyone complains of lack of personnel, Dr V would quip “you don’t find people, you build them.”

Dr V’s life exemplifies the significance of spirituality and a higher consciousness in transforming our lives by integrating a sense of purpose in our daily work. To him, leading a spiritual life was not by renouncing the worldly activities or merely following rituals to seek the divine. He believed in transforming the lives of others as a path to divinity. According to him, restoring eyesight to all, irrespective of social or economic status, was an important step toward achieving this spiritual goal. When we grow in spiritual consciousness, we identify ourselves with all that is in the world, and there is no exploitation—it is ourselves we are helping; it is ourselves we are healing. He believed that hospitals are workplaces where all of us can become a better instrument of the divine in an attempt to reach the higher consciousness [Fig. 3].

Leadership is a personal quest you undertake, one based on a mission that troubles your heart.[2]
What Harriet Rubin, a senior writer at Fast Company, said on Dr V cannot be truer.

Dr V was a blend of intense professional will and compelling modesty, epitomizing level 5 leadership in his approach to alleviate one form of human suffering, blindness.

He inspired whoever came in touch with him to strive to seek perfection in whatever one did. By helping create a dedicated system, culture, and standards, Dr Venkataswamy had laid a very strong foundation for the continued legacy of his organization to the world. He also inculcated a cult-like culture of Work in his organization that often transforms good workplaces to great ones. According to Dr Venkataswamy, “Intelligence and capabilities are not enough. There must be the joy of doing something beautiful," which succinctly summarizes his life’s work.

R Krishnadas, R D Ravindran¹, P Namperumalsamy²

Director HR, Aravind Eye Care System, ¹Chairman, Aravind Eye Care System, ²Founder Member, Chairman Emeritus, Aravind Eye Care System, India. E-mail: Krishnadas@aravind.org

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Authors

Dr. R Krishnadas
Director, Human Resource Development, Aravind Eye Care System, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

Dr. RD Ravindran
Chairman; Director - Quality, Aravind Eye Care System, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

Dr. P Namperumalsamy
Chairman Emeritus; Director - Research, Aravind Eye Care System, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India