

Planting Seeds

by Rajiv Tandon



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I did not want to follow in the footsteps of my family, as senior civil servants, in India. Businessmen, as depicted in popular cinema, were crooks and were to be despised- that too was out! How then did I end up as an entrepreneur? My story is not unusual – that is what many immigrants do!

An engineering degree led to a position in a steel foundry. Driven to improve processes, I discovered the newly emerging field of Operations Research (OR). Practitioners encouraged me to join a formal US program.

I was about to be married and my fiancé was working on her own degree. Both of us applied in our respective disciplines and our best option was Stanford and her Columbia. A quick look at the map of the US made it clear that this was not going to work. University of Minnesota was our only common ground. We planned to come to Minnesota and then move somewhere else, but here we are after nearly 50 years. This is our new home.

At the University I graduated with a MS. While enrolled in the MBA program I taught an independent class in Production Management. A connection, with one of my students, led to a fifteen-year career at a car rental company. When that company was sold, I was fascinated by the concept of success against stiff competition and innovation. Who were the exemplars? An entrepreneur. I had reached my *raison d'être*.

Fast forward. I went back to school; wrote my Ph.D. dissertation; helped start the very first University program in Entrepreneurship in the region; became a tenured professor; started a few companies. In 2013 I retired to play golf-and I sucked at it.

My only regret is in leaving family and friends; people who need no explanation on who you are. Here we had to explain ourselves repeatedly. One curious question was, “How could you leave your God behind”. Over time it led to prayers at home and later in a failing church. Today the Hindu Temple in Maple Grove is a recognized tourist spot. We also had to normalize some ‘streets of gold’ myths of America. “Why are there homeless people?” Myriads of stereotypes had to be exposed-many in us. “Only choose a STEM career. Why?” Resolution of such tensions led to new norms.

Incidents of unfairness were balanced by a helping hand that expected no return. Once I had insufficient money to pay for the groceries. A random person in the line paid for it all and refused any attempts to mail her back a check. These were preparations for future rejections by qualified customers as well as help of selfless mentors to provide a missing ingredient.

Unfortunately, lately we have not been planting seeds of new companies. It is declining for the past six years throughout the country and Minnesota has slipped more. The Institute for Innovators and Entrepreneurs is my contribution to reverse this trend for the future economic prosperity of our home. Retirement bah humbug!