

Brick by Red Brick: Ravi Matthai and the Making of IIM Ahmedabad

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T T Ram Mohan (2011). Brick by Red Brick: Ravi Matthai and the Making of IIM Ahmedabad. Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd, Price: Rs. 495, Pages 281, ISBN: 9788129117861.

A Rich Tribute to a Great Visionary

As the convocation of IIM Ahmedabad (IIMA) was nearing to the closer, the author of the book, TT Ram Mohan, who was sitting on the dais, was startled while looking into the thick group of trees on the fringes of Tower lawn. Reason: In the opening between the two trees, a face had appeared and it was none other than Ravi Matthai (of the younger days), former director of IIMA, who died in 1984, watching the convocation proceedings intently. This scene could have been a perfect setting for a thrilling novel. But as readers go through the last page of the book, when the imagination of the author is expressed, one is bound to empathize with the author, who concludes, assuring the imaginative Ravi Matthai, "We are doing okay Professor. We can't possibly let you down, now can we?"

The book authored by Ram Mohan is a rich tribute to the man who selflessly strived hard to build the country's premier management institute. The book offers the reader a great journey in time right from the inception of the institute in the 1950s till date. It dwells into the issues related to the conceptualization, establishment and functioning of the premier management institute of India. The initial chapters of the book take us to the era of 1950s when the then Prime Minister Late Jawahar Lal Nehru was spearheading institution-building across the nation. It is surprising to know that in India the impetus for a major initiative in management education came from the Ford Foundation in India. Based on the request of Ford Foundation, the dean of Harvard Business School recommended two professors, Richard Meriam and Harold Thurlby, who visited Bombay in early 1957 and submitted a report on their return.

After many twists and turns, the Government of India had set up a planning committee for the IIM under the chairmanship of Dr. Jivraj Mehta, the then Chief Minister of Gujarat. The book also captures the drama involved in the decision to locate the IIM at Ahmedabad, when a place like Bombay (now Mumbai) was already available as a preferred location, with better resources and facilities. The book also highlights the four remarkable personalities who collaborated to carry forward the idea of IIM at Ahmedabad. Vikram Sarabhai, founder of ISRO (who also served as honorary director of IIMA from 1961 to 65), was widely appreciated for institution building. His main strength was mentioned as building people. Kamla Chowdhary was closely involved in conceiving IIMA and was credited with seeing through the implementation of IIMA project in the formative years. Kasturbhai Lalbhai, a prominent business man of Ahmedabad (founder of Arvind Mills) was another person credited with serving on the board of IIMA for many years since its inception and safeguarding its academic autonomy. Prakash Tandon, the first Indian Chairman of Hindustan Lever, served on the board of IIMA, and took over as chairman of the board in 1964. Tandon was credited with overseeing the transition from Sarabhai to a complete outsider, Ravi Matthai.

The book narrates the teething troubles IIMA faced in its early days. The issues related to finding proper teaching staff, a full time director, and its relationship with Harvard Business School etc. After these initial discussions, the book introduces us to the real protagonist of the book - none other than Ravi Matthai, who became the director of IIMA in the year 1965. The author narrates how Ravi Matthai joined IIM Calcutta as a teaching faculty in 1963, after being a successful

CEO, who had turned around a loss making company of a British corporate group.

At the age of 38, Ravi Matthai was hand-picked by Vikram Sarabhai to become the director of IIMA. The book details on the initial hiccups he faced as the director of IIMA and how he overcame them. Ravi identified recruitment and development of faculty as his top priorities at IIMA. As he felt that recruiting faculty within the country would only redistribute faculty from one institution to another, he made a bold move, visited the USA in May 1967 (the first of his many visits), identified potential faculty/ doctoral candidates, interviewed 65 candidates all by himself and made 18 offers. He made trips to US again in October 1967, 1968 and 1969. Given the fact that IIMA then was a new institute and opportunities in US were far more superior to the opportunities in India, the increase in faculty strength during his tenure with a large component trained in the US was almost entirely Matthai's accomplishment. Matthai successfully convinced C.K.Prahlad to join IIMA in 1971 is a testimony to his ability in spotting talent and his commitment to institutional building.

Of the many achievements of IIMA under the leadership of Ravi, the notable ones include:

1. Getting grants for recurring expenses from the Government, lifting of ceiling towards non-recurring expenses, and sanction of grants towards buildings.
2. Shifting from temporary premises to the Vastrapur campus at Ahmedabad.
3. Launching of the doctoral programme titled "Fellowship Programme in Management" in spite of the reservations of the faculty members.
4. Initiatives towards the faculty development at the universities through Universities Teachers Programme (UTP).
5. Preparation of indigenous cases at IIMA.
6. Launching of one-year programme of Management in Agriculture.

The book also rightly points out that IIMA differs from university system in terms of the autonomy it enjoys. In the chapter, "Getting the Software Right", the book

addresses three critical aspects of IIMA that make it different from the conventional university system: the degree of autonomy it enjoys; freedom of expression for faculty; and faculty say in decision-making. The author also notes that Ravi Matthai steered clear of laying explicit rules and regulations in the institute and even though a draft handbook of rules was prepared in 1999 and revised in 2004, till date a composite book of the institute does not exist. Ravi's beliefs are expressed in the following phrases: 'a self-regulating culture', which is 'built upon building people'; 'a tradition of attitudes'; 'self-regulation based on self-discipline.' After relinquishing the directorship, Ravi continued as a faculty in spite of getting lucrative offers inside and outside India. In this period, Ravi's involvement in the Jawaja (a village in Rajasthan) project to uplift the rural poor and transform rural education is captured quite reasonably in the book. Unfortunately, hectic lifestyle and heavy smoking took toll on Ravi's health. After a bypass surgery in London in December 1983, Ravi Matthai passed away on February 13, 1984.

Although at times it may appear that hero worship of the protagonist is advocated, enough care is taken by the author to narrate instances that justify the adulation Ravi Matthai received. For instance, when the author got in touch with one of his former secretaries K S Venkatadri and remarked 'I have a problem in writing this book. Nobody has anything unkind to say about Matthai. I thought I would call and ask you if you could tell me two or three negative things about him'. Venkatadri responded, 'What can I say, Professor, he was the most exemplary human being I have ever come across. I have not met another like him.'" And interestingly the book takes the conversation forward to the current developments in running IIMs, not just limiting to the era of Ravi. In times when it is difficult to attract good quality faculty, the saga of Ravi could motivate the young readers to take up teaching and would assure them that they could still do a great job of institutional building and contribute to the building of the nation.

If one poses a question of who should read the book, the answer is everyone and anyone who would be interested in institution building, or anyone willing to

take a delightful literary tour of the making of the premier B-School of India. The narration is simple and straight forward, and a person with an average understanding of English (but with enough interest on the subject) could easily follow it. This book is for everyone, professionals, students, executives who would like to have a dose of energy and motivation to do great

things in life. The book definitely is not a biography of Ravi Matthai, but it truly presents the contribution of the great man. It has been rightly quoted in the book, the remark of John McArthur, dean of Harvard Business School which reads: "Ravi was instrumental in making IIMA the premier B-School in the far east and one of the best anywhere in the world."

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