

# Career of Ram

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The story of Ram is one of a small town boy hailing from a village in Tamil Nadu who through his life traverses a varied career, one the author calls unique. The reader is invited to explore the journey of Ram and reflect on career choices, transitions and explorations of both Ram's career and through it, one's own.

Ram's story unfolds from his early days in a remote village of Tamil Nadu where afflicted with polio, he manages to eventually overcome his handicap, aided by his persistence and long arduous walks to his school. He decides to explore life outside his village and with his persuasiveness, convinces a group of widows to take him along on their pilgrimage up north and allow him to drop off on the return journey at Calcutta. Once in Calcutta, he starts his career as a stenographer, working his way up, quitting his job to take up one with a tobacco company in a sales capacity. That he was quick with numbers and had an extroverted personality helped him along. He also consciously chose to adopt the ways of life in an alien city, forgoing his traditional pigtail and garb for the more acceptable appearance of the society there. His sales job allowed him to travel and pick up additional knowledge of the business. After some years on the job he returned to Calcutta and on the recommendation of a friend picked up a diploma in accounting, joining an insurance company when a vacancy emerged. Here he grew rapidly in the organization and when the English left the country, various jobs opened up and he got appointed to a senior role as a chief accountant and company secretary, a coveted position. Along the way he never forgot to give back to those less fortunate than him, with many an act of social service. In a couple of years he got increasingly preoccupied with a sense of being treated unfairly in the organization, as compared to others in his position with better qualifications and exposure. The imagined sense of injustice led him to resign his job in a huff, much against the advice of his wife and friends. The harsh reality hit him then, when jobs he expected to come,

didn't materialize. For four years he was out of a job and forced to dip into his savings for supporting his now large family. Well into his middle age, he finally decided to take up a job in a pharmaceutical company for a much lower salary, in another part of the country. Here his previous sales experience came to use and coupled with his other capabilities, he was quick to rise in the corporate ladder, retiring in a senior role as chief purchasing manager. Although Ram never made it to the position of a company director, which he secretly aspired for, he died a much content man, with his children living out his career aspirations and leaving a legacy of a man others looked up to, evinced by a funeral attended by all his kith and kin.

On the face of it, the career of Ram may not appear that unique. It is after all a story of a man who retired as a chief purchasing manager of a pharmaceutical company. One may wonder what is unique about this particular career. However, when one considers the long journey undertaken by Ram, both in terms of the spatial (from a small village in Tamil Nadu to the alien world of Calcutta and to the eventual move to Mumbai) and the breadth and richness of experiences that shaped his career and choices around it, the story takes on a contoured meaning. Here was a career that took form in varied ways, from the decision to move out and envisage a career in distant Calcutta, to acquiring skills of accountancy and sales, to the final resolve to not be a victim of circumstance and move and start afresh, all of which traces the journey of a strong willed and determined man that traversed a journey from a stenographer to a senior leadership role. The journey is laced with myriad explorations, some attributable to chance, some to sheer grit, perseverance and willingness to experiment and adapt.

Interspersed are various questions about choices and careers, that the reader is drawn to explore both from the perspective of Ram as well as the reader's own vantage point. Questions about what makes a career

unique and who is to judge? Can career success be measured in absolute terms or by an external yardstick or is it about the journey, length and breadth that each individual travels along his/her career path. Is success defined in terms of how high you reach, or what you overcome and learn along the way, or how content or satisfied you are, or by how you measure up against your own personal goals in your career, or by something else? How much of a handle does an individual have in shaping once career? Is it about well-informed choices or other forces, known and unknown, which guide our choices and help shape our career? In a similar vein, what opportunities present themselves for altering or shaping one's career and how can one be attentive of these? Who or what are the career anchors that define our career? How important are qualifications and can experience or practical knowledge supplant acquired knowledge through formal means and degrees? Ultimately, in thinking of Ram's career, one is goaded to think about one's own career and what kind of a career story, one would like to have for the self.

The narrative, while simplistic in one sense, opens up the space for a deeper dialogue about what informs and shapes a career and life in general. There are layers that the story can help probe. About reflections on careers, its definition, career paths and career choices to the role of personality, qualifications, luck, encounters, conditioning, attitudes, perceptions and attributions in shaping a career, and even to the role of empathy in one's life. For example, the form that Ram's career took was in part a function of his own personality and traits of ambition, confidence, determination, hard work and risk taking, as well as the chance encounters of being able to accompany the widows that allowed his transportation to Calcutta and others such as the

encounter with a friend who recommended the accounting training that helped him migrate from a stenographer to an accountant. Similarly his decision to resign his comfortable job when he was doing well owed much to his attitudes, possibly hubris and perception of being wronged in the company, how he made attributions for slights and being passed over, that forced his career along a different path. The penny dropped for Ram when after the hurried resignation, his career did not take shape the way he had imagined. This moment of reckoning when out of a job for a prolonged period made him painfully aware of his shortcomings such as not being a graduate although enriched by a wealth of practical experience.

The notion of Bonsai traps is akin to the research on why successful managers derail, that Morgan McHall in his book, *High Flyers: Determining the next generation of leaders* (1998) discusses. The story of Ram also echoes Hall's research of how sources of initial success can often become fatal flaws, such as ambition that served well early on can become a hurdle if it propels the self towards excessive risk taking or eventual derailment. The story of Ram also invites the reader to search for our own Bonsai traps, become aware of them and take necessary action so potential career derailment is averted.

In essence, the narrative of Ram, offers multiple lenses and opportunities to engage. It can remain at the exploration of another's career and through it journey the labyrinth of career choices and vicissitudes, or it can serve to initiate explorations of one's own career through the prism of Ram's, or alternatively it can implore one to question assumptions held about careers and acceptable practices, to look at what are taken to be desirable ends and explore the means to those ends.

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