

# **From the limits of self to the unlimited Self: A Case Study of Aravind Eye Hospitals**

## **Teaching Notes**

### **(i) Main Teaching Objectives**

The case addresses the following key themes / issues

1. Exposing the participants to a new / alternative organizational model of a socially responsible institution and to an alternative model of leadership based on caring, humility, equality and service to humanity coupled with a low-key and unobtrusive management style.
2. Examining how a set of core principles permeate the strategies, structure and systems in a seamless way and generate a holistic institutional ethos (principles such as integrity, simplicity, compassionate service, commitment to a cause).
3. Exploring how these core principles emanate from a personal philosophy of the founder / founders and how this philosophy, in turn, evolves from a larger and robust philosophical / spiritual system (in this case Aurobindo's philosophy)
4. Analysing how this personal philosophy is built up over time through life's experiences and how it is systematically / consistently translated into the various organs of the institution that the leader creates (strategy / structure / system)
5. Discussing the significance of rediscovering / reinterpreting life-affirming and socially responsible philosophies (such as Gandhi and Aurobindo) and their relevance in the contemporary managerial context.

**(ii) Background Notes**

The case can be used in MBA, Executive MBA or Executive Education Programs in courses on Corporate Social Responsibility, Strategy, corporate and social entrepreneurship, personality development, creativity and innovation and even Indian culture and ethos.

The case provides a rich background, having potential application in multiple learning contexts. The instructor can determine the relative emphasis of different segments of the case, depending on the salient focus of the course. The case has major relevance for CSR, as it demonstrates powerfully that socially committed organizations can be highly efficient and successful as well. It also outlines the roadmap and key pre-requisites in that important endeavor. It can also be a valuable case for Strategy in that it stresses the need for the close fit and consistency between Mission, Strategy and Systems, and also shows how such a fit can be maintained even under trying circumstances. The case also is a fertile ground for obtaining insights into the process and determinants of innovation. Finally it can also make a valuable contribution on themes of self-analysis, self-renewal and reinvention, power of a personal philosophy in handling complex personal problems and in providing sustained inspiration over extended spells of time.

The life of Dr. V serves as a forceful inspiration for overcoming personal adversities and redefining one's life goals in a new direction.

**(iii) References and materials sources**

- 1) Venkataswamy, Govindappa, “Illuminated Spirit”, The Paulist Press, New York, 1994
- 2) Rubin, Harriet, “The Perfect Vision of Dr. V”, *Fast Company*, February 2001
- 3) Surender, B. “The World’s most efficient doctor”, *Man’s World*, October 2002
- 4) Prahalad, C.K. “The Fortune at the bottom of the Pyramid”, *Wharton School Publishing*
- 5) “Aravind Eye Care System: Giving them the most precious gift”, a case prepared by S. Manikutty and Neharika Vohra, Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, 2003
- 6) “A Tribute to the Light” – A publication of Aravind Eye Hospitals
- 7) Documents published by various organizations that form Aravind Eye Care System
- 8) Various quotations in the case are taken from the above documents

**(iv) Questions / Discussion Issues**

1. What according to you, are the key factors that enabled Dr. V to create the world's largest eye care system, from its extremely small beginnings?
2. Do you see any challenges for Aravind, after the passing away of Dr. V, the founder and chief inspiration? Do you think the Aravind model is sustainable?
3. What is the new model of organization and leadership that Aravind Hospitals seem to presage? How did it fare on CSR? Can this be replicated?
4. Why do well-meaning philosophies of founders espousing social commitment often flounder in practice? What were the unique factors which enabled Dr. V to translate his philosophy into reality? Can there be a union of social responsibility, organizational success and personal fulfillment?
5. Discuss the relevance of life-affirming and socially sensitive philosophies in the highly complex and stress-ridden management world. Can the power of inspiring and broad-minded philosophies be harnessed to direct organizational energies towards common good?

**(v) Notes and Guidance to Teachers**

The following strategy can be adopted by the instructor to derive maximum benefit from the case study. The instructor can identify five distinct groups within the class beforehand and assign them the five questions and ask them to make crisp focused but in-depth presentations. This division of work facilitates deeper analysis and rich presentation, which will enrich the subsequent open-house discussion.

The groups are advised to access the source documents, to supplement their knowledge-base, as per the requirements of each question. The first group, however, would be well-advised to do a quick run-through of the other cases on Aravind. This is because the first question is the “foundation question” which pieces together various details in the case to knit together a coherent account of Aravind’s journey spanning three decades. Selective use by this group of background information from other sources can prove very valuable not only for the first question, but in enriching the analysis of the other four questions as well. The instructor, hence, is well-advised to make full use of the background information from diverse sources indicated in the references and suggested further readings.

It will be an excellent idea, if the instructor can arrange for a senior Aravind Director (who played an active role in Aravind’s growth story) to attend the session. His remarks and insights would immensely contribute to the classroom discussion. He can also share his experiences in the informal interaction outside the classroom with the interested participants. Similarly, an expert on Aurobindo philosophy, if he can be invited for the session, can add a new dimension by elucidating the practical implications of Aurobindo’s thought. Another measure that can be pursued over a longer term is to facilitate a visit to Aravind at Madurai or a summer project, so that an intimate feel of an extraordinary institution can be experienced. If time permits, screening of the film “Infinite Vision” made on Aravind can be done, which would bring the story alive and would communicate it forcefully.

**(vi) Further Suggested Readings for Teachers**

- 1) Prahalad C.K., Hammond Allen, “Serving the World’s Poor, Profitably”, *Harvard Business Review*, September 2002
- 2) Christensen, Clayton M. et al, “Disruptive Innovation for Social Change”, *Harvard Business Review*, December 2006
- 3) The other cases on Aravind Eye Hospitals developed by
  - a) Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad
  - b) Harvard Business School