

An Interview with:

**Mr. Rangaswamy Elango
Sarpanch (Headman), Kuthambakkam Village
India**

In the village of Kuthambakkam 35 km west of Chennai in India, a 40-year old chemical engineer-turned-village-leader is quietly demonstrating the feasibility of Gram Swaraj (Village Self-rule): a Gandhian development philosophy rooted in self-sustenance, economic autonomy and self-governance.

Mr. Rangaswamy Elango was born into a Dalit farmer's family in Kuthambakkam in 1960, and like any other educated village youth, he had dreams of moving out of his village into the city to a well-paying job. He went on to become a scientist at the Central Electro Chemical Research Institute (CECRI), where he worked for eight years. As his true vocational calling turned stronger, however, he left his job in 1994 and returned to Kuthambakkam for good. In 1996 he successfully contested in the village Panchayat elections as an independent candidate. After his election, Elango was able to provide his villagers with sustainable employment through government schemes, engaging them in development works like building hand-made bricks to construct houses.



The village now has self help groups for women, an information center and computer education facilities, and is moving towards a computerized administration. Elango's vision of a village that is self-sustained and yet modern may yet bear fruit, although the government has not done enough to encourage and fund e-governance.

What made you leave your job as a CECRI scientist to go back to Kuthambakkam village in 1994?

It was the basic humanity that is in me and in everyone else. I am basically a villager and I have seen people struggle to obtain 2 pots of water a day. I was 33 when I left my job and I felt I had to do something. For the past fifty years nothing has been happening to change villages in India, and they remain backward and poor. The government is the sole agent of power, but does virtually nothing. People don't have food to eat and don't know why. I thought that God has given me the opportunity to learn and grow and why should I not use this opportunity to help others. Quitting my job meant losing my salary, but then thousands and thousands of people live in villages and manage to get enough food to live. I thought I would also manage to get by.

In a caste segregated society, as is the case in Indian villages, you must have faced some obstacles. How did you deal with them?

There were many big obstacles. In my village the Dalit (lower caste) families outnumbered the non-Dalit (upper caste) families. I talked with the non-Dalits about the reasons behind the confrontation between them and the Dalits, and over time convinced them that the problems stemmed from decades of neglect. Upper castes had appropriated most of the government funds for their own benefit, leaving the Dalits backward and poor. Now we had to take up their cause and give them a voice. This was not only just, but would also promote a feeling of oneness in the village. It took over a year to convince the upper castes to spend the government money on developing the Dalits' community.

What made you choose a political path as opposed to, say, opening your own non-governmental organization?

Panchayati Raj means power to the people at the grassroots and that is how it should be. There are 3 tiers to *Panchayati Raj* -- village, block and district level. I am involved only at the village level, which is less political. Everyone knows each other and makes a decision based on the knowledge of the others' character. Thus there is respect for the individuals.

The problem with an NGO is that that it cannot do much after a point. It does not have the decision-making power. One could conceivably start an NGO in a village, but then someone else would be occupying the *Panchayat* post and having the ruling power, and may not support the work of the NGO.

How did your family and friends react to your decision to leave your job at CECRI?

I faced many problems for two years after leaving my salaried job. I had a family to feed and many household responsibilities. My wife was upset and I faced a lot of humiliation from our relatives. "Money" (or rather the lack of it) was the only reason for this humiliation. I tolerated it all because I had to prove that I could make a change for the better. Now they understand my work and help me.

Being an Ashoka fellow has benefited me immensely. They give a fellowship of Rs. 12,000 a month and this helped me meet my expenses.

How do you plan to replicate your work in other villages?

We have developed a model of village self-sustenance and I would like to see the work replicated in other parts of the country. However, seed capital is required for any village to implement such a plan. In Tamil Nadu, we run a "*Panchayat Academy*". We regularly call 50 good *Panchayat* leaders to stay with us for a week and learn the development process first hand. They go back to their villages with their own plans based on what they have seen and what would work in their villages.

In Andhra Pradesh I have been working with Dr. Parmeshwar Rao to select some good villages and village leaders. In Karnataka, 50 to 60 villages have been selected. Our aim is to have a *Panchayat* academy in every state of the country.

Do you have any message for people?

My message is that wherever you are, whatever post you are at, try to contribute some portion of your life or resources to help rebuild villages. In earlier times, entire kingdoms were supported by villages. Colonialism unfortunately killed the strength of these villages. Now we have to work to rejuvenate them and we need all the help we can get.

What are your views on the current system of governance in India as it relates to your work?

Constitutionally, it is the government that conducts the *Panchayat* elections. However, in most states the *Panchayat* elections have become a mere namesake. Those who have the real political power are not interested in empowering *Panchayats*. Although there are hundreds of government programs directed at the villages, they are of no use—because mere allocation of funds does not solve the problems. Dirty politics is sucking the blood of our villages.

What kind of e-governance model do you have in your village, and how does it benefit you and your community.

I have access to a computer and Internet in my village. We have complete data of all families, including details of their consumption patterns. For instance, we know how much oil and rice are consumed by the villagers. We use this data to determine whether it is possible to produce everything we need in the village itself.

The Internet proves useful to us as we can advertise our products in the global market, and we get many queries regarding them. We have access to email and everyone in the village can use it. And I can also do my work from a distance.

If you are reading this interview and are motivated by the work of Mr. Rangaswamy Elango, then you can consider making a small donation to support the work he is doing. Mr. Elango can be contacted at panchayat@yahoo.com

HelloLife.org thanks Sangeetha Sriram for bringing this initiative to light.

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