

# Building Bridges, not Walls: Key to Togetherness

President R. Venkataraman Memorial Lecture on  
3<sup>rd</sup> December 2016 by Dr. Ali Khwaja

We have entered into an era of globalization and the entire world has become one village, communication to any place is possible at the touch of a button, information can be obtained from any source anywhere. Old friends can be located after half a century, detailed directions on locating an ATM machine in your neighborhood is freely available, you can get instructions on how to set right your mobile or how to make a bomb without paying a dime.

But in this very era we are losing touch with our neighbors or relatives, we are too busy for our children (and subsequently they are even busier to give any attention to us). What starts at the individual and family level is expanding to international levels by the hostility and coldness that countries are showing towards each other. The most powerful countries are forcing the smaller ones to come under their shadow, the threat being, "If you are not with us, you are against us."

Free will has taken a back seat. There is a compulsion to belong – to a religious group, to a club, to a WhatsApp group, to a professional identity etc. But in that process we are becoming part of a faceless horde (ironical, since the most popular social media is actually called 'Face' book). When we cannot connect at an individual level, there is a fear of our succumbing to herd mentality. Organizational behavior experts have always pointed out to us how differently people behave when they are thinking independently and when they are part of a team.

President Venkataraman was a great admirer of one of his predecessors, the philosopher and teacher **President Dr. S. Radhakrishnan**. I take this opportunity to quote the latter, "a civilization is not built by brick and mortar or steel and machinery; it is built with men, their quality and character." Hence if we wish to build bridges and reach out, it is to build the emotional



bridges that will win hearts and build character. This is the theme of my talk today.

Nations and societies are built of individual humans. Hence if we wish to see a better world we need to begin with the individual – and who better to start with than our own self, the person you spend all your time, 24/7 X 365 days a year, for your whole life. Let's start with a basic question: Why do we need to build bridges among men? Not to allow others to walk over the bridges that we build, but in order to facilitate our journey by crossing hurdles in our own path. Those who build bridges not only go far, but also go in the right direction, and have a smoother journey in the ups and downs of life. On the other hand, those who build walls around them, thinking that they are protecting themselves, are actually giving up the opportunity of benefiting from others' wisdom, knowledge, experience and support.

In a world full of diversity and widely varying beliefs, lifestyles and value systems, it will be prudent to recall the words of one of the greatest thinkers of the last century, **Swami Vivekananda**: "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee". Looking at the larger picture, if we can start the process with building bridges with ourselves, then with our loved ones, then with people in the vicinity or those we work with, and finally extend to human beings all over, regardless of their caste, creed and nationality.



In this context let us take the advice of someone from the other side of the globe, the illustrious late President of USA, **John F. Kennedy**: "In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe. Now the trumpet summons us again – not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are; but a call; to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope, patient tribulation", a

struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself. Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?"



I think we as Indians are in a better position today to join this historic effort that was started half a century ago, and needs a greater push now than ever before. Sometimes we can also learn from people who may not be highly educated or exposed to worldly affairs. A very touching event that I am left mesmerized with is when, in the year 1854 the then President of USA made an offer for a large area of the Red Indians land and promised a 'reservation' for the tribal people. Chief Seattle of the Red Indians replied:

"How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us.

If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.

The white man's dead forget the country of their birth when they go to walk among the stars. Our dead never forget this beautiful earth, for it is the mother of the Red Man. We part of the earth and it is part of us.

The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers.

So, when the great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land, he asks much of us.

But it will not be easy. For this land is sacred to us.

This shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors.

If we sell you land, you must remember that it is sacred, and you must teach your children that it is sacred and each ghostly reflection in the clear water of lakes tells of events & memories in the life of my people...

One thing we know, which the white man may one day discover -- our God is the same God. You may think now that you own Him as you wish to own our land; by you cannot.

He is the God of man, and His compassion is equal for the red man and the white. This earth is precious to Him, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator.

The whites too shall pass; perhaps sooner than all other tribes. Contaminate your bed & you will one night suffocate in your own waste. That destiny is a mystery to us, for we do not understand when the buffaloes are all slaughtered, the wild horses are tamed, the secret corners of the forest heavy with scent of many men, & the view of ripe hills blotted by talking wires....

Where is the thicket? Gone    Where is the eagle? Gone

*The end of living and the beginning of survival."*

History has been teaching us many such lessons on and off, and if we fail to learn, we may have to pay a very heavy price. Thirty years ago, when the eminent statesman in whose honor I stand before you to speak, **Mr. R. Venkatraman**, was elevated as the President of India, he minced no words when he said: "The nation needs, at this hour, consolidation and confidence. A consolidation of its gains, and the building of mutual confidence. Too many institutions and relationships have suffered an erosion of confidence. This cannot but have disastrous consequences. It will be my constant endeavor to play my due role in clearing mistrust, in strengthening the foundations of mutual understanding and confidence and in building bridges of respect between people and institutions. I appeal to all fellow citizens of this ancient land to march with firm with unwavering steps towards the goal of a peaceful and prosperous India. May I conclude with the lines that Mahatma Gandhi used to cite in his daily prayer: "Sabko sanmati de bhagwan".



Three decades have gone past, and great walls like the one in Berlin and the iron curtain of USSR, have fallen. China has entered into the world arena. India is building bridges with the Western world. Young and bright Indians like Sathya Nadella (CEO of Microsoft) and Sundar Pichhai (CEO of Google) have beaten global competition.

Nearer home, the amazing Karmayogi, **Engineer E. Sreedharan** was working in the Indian Railways when the pillars of the Pampan Bridge, the longest sea bridge in India at that time, were ravaged by a

cyclone and it appeared that the bridge would take months or years to rebuild. The budding Mr. Sreedharan took up the challenge, brought in local divers to locate the submerged pillars and set them back instead of spending crores constructing new ones. The bridge was built in half the time allotted, and that was the beginning from which this great engineer went on to build the engineering marvel, the Konkan Railway, and then the Delhi Metro, both of which were considered impossible tasks by foreign observers. The bridges of these railways stand as strong pillars to show us how human strength and determination can overcome the most insurmountable challenges.



We as Indians have not learnt to appreciate, acknowledge and encourage innumerable such 'karmayogis' who can build mental and emotional bridges across generations, across differences of opinion, and across the wide chasms and cracks that are tearing apart our society. Only if we as individual citizens throw our weight behind every bridge-builder can we expect to have a smooth journey of life, with all paths leading to the final destination quoted by Swami Vivekananda.

I would like to take the privilege of quoting another eminent thinker (who has not yet become President of India) **Mr. Essae Chandran**, who reminded us of where our journey towards this great progress began.



Mr. Chandran wrote in his book 'Reflections': "The seed of Indian freedom was sown in the waiting room on the platform of Maritzburg, the capital of Natal in South Africa by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The author of the Indian freedom may not have been M. K. Gandhi, but for the inspector who threw him out from the train without any injustice. Perhaps it was a trivial matter to the inspector. The seed was sown in the mind of M. K. Gandhi about the freedom of India in Maritzburg of South Africa and transformed him as Mahatma Gandhi ..... The reason for divorces between husband and wife, reason for breaking business partnerships among partners, breaking of relationships between closest friends and the outbreak of war between nations are said to arise out of trifles".



It is now up to us to do a strong introspection on where we stand, the rivers and valleys to be bridged, the obstacles ahead of us, the challenges of opposition that are likely to slow us down. We need to evaluate our resources, carefully identify who are our true friends, be ready for terrorists who blow up mental bridges, strengthen our team work and leadership, test our strengths in advance, and also keep alternatives ready when we set out on this journey of carving out paths, removing walls and barriers as they arise. Being non-judgmental, developing empathy and compassion, being good listeners, giving positive strokes to others (the basic practical skills that we teach when training people to become good counselors) will be required to be practiced by all of us if we wish to see these dreams materialize in our lifetime. We also owe to the next generation of our children the responsibility of passing on a world without physical or mental boundaries, without walls and barriers, and with strong sturdy bridges that will ensure that they take our mission forward smoothly.

This will slowly but surely create give rise to the cherished dream of Guruji Rabindranath Tagore whose immortal words still resound in our minds:

*"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high  
Where knowledge is free  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls  
Where words come out from the depth of truth  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards  
perfection  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way  
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit  
Where the mind is led forward by thee  
Into ever-widening thought and action  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake".*



**Dr. Ali Khwaja**, B.Tech (IIT), MIE, MIIM, Ph.D.  
Chairman, **Banjara Academy** [www.banjaraacademy.org](http://www.banjaraacademy.org)

*"If we have to teach real peace in this world and if we have to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children." – Mahatma Gandhi*