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## Love, not log frames

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*Philanthropy needs an overhaul, from narrow illusions of control to promoting empathy and agency.*

We will likely remember 2020 for three things. The year the phrase 'you are on mute' went mainstream. The year we want to forget, and not view in hindsight. And the year of the pandemic that didn't break us, but revealed how deeply we were already broken.

On April 23rd, 1910, Theodore Roosevelt delivered a speech titled "Citizenship in a Republic". The portion that has been most widely quoted is this:

"It's not the critic who counts; it's not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done the better. The credit belongs to those of us who are actually in the arena [...] we strive valiantly and sometimes there's the triumph of achievement but at the worst, we fail, but at least we fail while daring greatly."

Daring greatly. That is what Indian civil society was **called to do this year**. That is the moral obligation many felt and embraced.

If the longevity of a society lies in its agility and resilience, in its capacity to stay true to its foundational values while evolving with the ever-changing nature of society, then 2020 showed us how samaaj—civil society organisations—continues to hold that flame and carry that message. Only samaaj has the legitimacy and capacity to reimagine solutions that work for all of us in ways that restore agency, redistribute power, re-craft egalitarian societies and renegotiate the social contract in contemporary times.

But demanding and driving such change is not a linear process. While the world today is much more interconnected and smaller in many ways, we continue to grapple with large and complex societal challenges. Many of these require systemic change—change that is collaborative, and that catalyses the spirit of innovation latent in our society. This requires reinforcing fundamental human values and encouraging new thinking.

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When we talk about systemic change, we don't speak about what it will take from us. Not just from the leaders of movements and nonprofits, but also from us, the donors. We ask samaaj to dare greatly, but as funders, we must also recognise that supporting such change requires collaboration, risk, agency, and empathy. We need to learn to take bigger risks and to put more trust in social sector leaders.

Systemic approaches require making the 'big' bets collaboratively. They demand a new perspective towards philanthropy, one that fosters the agency of grantees and the communities they work with, and relinquishes illusions of control that tend to determine the contours of restricted, specific grants and hyper-reporting.

Societal change cannot occur overnight: As donors, we need to embrace unrestricted, organisational support grants, we need to commit to a higher quantum of capital, and we need to increase our risk appetite and patience to see change happen in the long run. To dare greatly is to trust in the people and the process and not misplace faith in the comfort of monthly reports. We need to meet samaaj where they are.

We all know many samaaj leaders who want to transform their work exponentially and reimagine the scale of their operations. We know they want to build movements of change and co-create, rather than deliver alone. How then, do we find ways for investors and other ecosystem partners to understand their pain, understand their needs and fears, and build support networks to enable daring greatly? Doing this as individual donors or funding organisations is difficult; but can we do it as a sector? We need wholehearted change and it will only come when we, as funders, choose courage over comfort.

Yes, failure is inevitable. It is integral to innovation and it allows us to learn, do, learn again, and then do again. Every failure offers an opportunity for everyone in the ecosystem to learn, because when our programmes, approaches, and organisations fail and restart, they don't start from scratch, rather from experience.

As donors, we must support norms and practices that minimise the costs of failure for leaders, missions, and the ecosystems in which we operate. Norms in how we, as donors, perceive and react to failure—not as a loss but as a chance for the sector to learn and iterate from. We must create shared spaces for our leaders to openly discuss these failures by encouraging the idea of public goods and public resources such that even when missions fail, the content and tools and methods built remain available to build upon by others.

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Empathy is required to recognise that we need to redistribute, reorganise, and transfer power and agency rather than knowledge or resources alone. In her new book, Melinda Gates identifies that it is easy for funders to kill

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diversity in the areas they enter because, first, "...if a major funder enters an area and picks one approach over others, people working in the area might abandon their own ideas to pursue the funder's because that's where the money is. If this happens, instead of finding good ideas, the funder can inadvertently kill them off." Second, "...in philanthropy—in contrast to business—it can be hard to know what's working." And third, that "...wealthy people can think that their success in one thing makes them an expert in everything. So they just act on instinct instead of talking to people who've spent their lives doing the work."

And finally, we need the courage to let go and to say we do not know it all. Brene Brown says it best, "...vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never a weakness."

Maybe 2020 can be redeemed yet. The year when we learned to meet others where they are. The year we learned to lead with love. After all, the modern definition of philanthropy—according to [Francis Bacon](#) who considered it synonymous with 'goodness'—is as the 'love of humanity'. Love, not log frames.

This article was originally published on [India Development Review](#).

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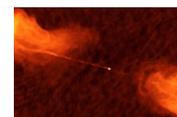
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