

## Arun Roy on Ajit Kumar Ghorai

Ajit Kumar Ghorai (AKG), my maternal grandfather, was an exceptional man by any standard. When I was very young, government officials and other prominent individuals would often come by to meet with him. This meant nothing to me at the time and it was only later in life that I came to realize the full extent of his exceptionalism. A complex and multifaceted man with strong leadership skills, AKG was able to create deep integration between his life domains of Self, Home, Community and Work.

When AKG was still in University, his father passed away. As the oldest son, he supported his widowed mother, raised his sister and brother, put them through University and arranged for their marriages (very important in traditional Hindu culture). He completed his own education from Calcutta University, which was one of the most prestigious universities in India, studying Mathematics for undergrad and then Economics for his Masters degree. He then joined the civil service, first at the state level and later in life at the federal level (Indian Administrative Service) but serving in one state. At the time this was one of the most prestigious and coveted careers in India. He devoted his life to rural development in India and his last two roles before retirement were Secretary of Panchayats (rural self government) and Secretary of Fisheries (huge industry in West Bengal). These are very senior government roles, reporting directly to the top civil servants in one of India's largest states. On occasion he traveled to New Delhi (the national capital) to report to counterparts in the central government.

AKG's value system was rooted in traditional Indian values and in Gandhian philosophy. Thus his values included family, total self-reliance, constant perseverance, courage and continued commitment to development of the nation. E.g., as an introvert, he initially struggled with public speaking, an important aspect of one of his earlier roles as a District Magistrate, but he overcame his struggles with perseverance and courage. Eventually, he felt confident enough to appear in radio talk shows to speak about rural development.

These values were also reflected in his Work life, through his commitment to rural development, which he also kept up past his retirement in 1981. After retiring, he was involved in various social development projects and wrote articles on rural development in magazines. He also taught at a local college for government officers – he even taught the very day he passed in June 2002, a few months short of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

From what I have been able to gather, his values were also expressed in the Home domain. AKG is remembered as a deeply caring husband and father. While Work certainly kept him busy, he made time for his family. The nature of his job meant that he was frequently transferred because of promotions or role changes, but AKG's children never suffered as a result. Many other government officers' children had to miss a few years of their educations because of frequent transfers, but AKG somehow ensured that this did not happen to his children. Finally, when his wife fell ill with Shingles (H. Zoster) and Encephalitis in 1997, he single handedly nursed her back to health.

He also made a point of upholding his commitment to Community through his Work domain, i.e., he was incorruptible. Many other powerful government officials – in his own time and today – used their positions as opportunities for self-aggrandizement. AKG did not. In one memorable incident, after being transferred to a new location, a very rich local businessman came to their government provided home with several big baskets full of gifts. AKG and his wife became irate and chased the businessman away, but the ease with which the guards allowed him onto the property indicated that the individual who had previously held that role had been happy to accept bribes. Word quickly spread that this official does not take anything under the table. Sometimes AKG made enemies this way and occasionally this did hurt him professionally. E.g., he was transferred before two years, which is the typical minimum timeframe for a position, although there is admittedly no 'official' fixed tenure. Nevertheless, it seems that he remained clear on the connection between his Self, Community and Work domains.

Over the years, AKG found many ways to integrate his Self, Community and Work domains. E.g., linguistics was among AKG's many hobbies. When he was posted to Chandannagar, a former French colony, he lobbied the government to provide funding for French language classes at a local museum[1] so that the local community would have access to foreign language training. French classes are still taught there today. In the process, AKG became connected to a very prominent Indian linguist of the time, furthering his hobby and thus also his Self domain. He found even more opportunities to integrate Community and Work in many interesting ways. E.g., he once helped a cash-starved medical college by lobbying the government for funding. E.g., he used his contacts in the government to arrange funding for a homeless shelter initiative which had stalled for some time. None of these actions were required of him as a government officer but he used the powers and connections provided by his Work role to deepen his contributions to the Community and be a public servant in the truest sense. In this way, AKG's legacy is scattered throughout West Bengal to this day.

Clearly, I have much to learn from AKG about integrating the different domains of my life. Most importantly, it appears that choice of profession is key. Somehow AKG was able to find roles that allowed him to maintain his economic obligations to Home, contribute to Community and still be fulfilled in both Work and Self. To build on that, it seems clear that there was a lifelong integration between AKG's hobbies (Self) and his work in Work and his contributions to Community that contributed to his sense of happiness and well-being. Finally, he even found ways to connect Self and Home. A spiritual man, he and his wife became followers/disciples of a famous regional saint after his retirement.

There is one area in which I might be able to improve on AKG's legacy and that is the overlap between Work and Home. Although AKG was careful to make sure his Work domain did not come in the way of his Home life, it does not appear that he was able to meaningfully connect those two domains. Given that my wife and I both work in business and have a strong interest in entrepreneurship, this is an area where I already have some connection and might be able to build greater integration in the future. This effort to uncover AKG's life has been an eye-opening one. To me, he was always 'just' Deda (maternal grandfather) but now, as an adult and a student of leadership, I can see his memory illuminated in an entirely new way.

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[1] See 'Duplex's Mansion' and 'Chandannagar Museum and Institute'<http://rangandatta.wordpress.com/2012/03/14/chandannagar-a-slice-of-france/>  
<http://www.chandannagar.com/htmlfiles/tour.htm>