



The sage of Ann Arbor

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Internationally, across India and the world, tributes have flowed about CK — his thoughts, ideas and teaching. His books, his strategic thinking, his contributions to business development. And, his stamp on people across the globe has been immense. There were some other dimensions to this “man amongst men” which also need to be recorded. CK was not a machine. He was a very special human being of incredible quality.

He had a heart and he cared deeply — about his wife, his children, his grandchildren, his family, his colleagues, his friends, his country. He was not just a thinker and a teacher. CK was truly a “humane” person with warmth and caring for people. It came through actions. Through letters. Not soppy sentimental stuff but solid respect and affection. Foremost, of course, was his wife, Gayatri; who was by his side at lectures and events more often than not.

CK was a man of enormous humility. What he did not know, he admitted up front, many times. For example, he did not know and did not understand the workings of the government of India — and said so. He sought out, very selectively, people who he could trust, to explain and guide him on government people and systems (or lack thereof). Their functioning constantly amazed him. This was not the only case. He was always curious.

CK, in his contact with government, came to respect Prime Minister Manmohan Singh deeply. His meetings with the PM were always rich in content and ideas for India which gave CK enormous satisfaction. An idea which CK presented to the PM was to set up an agency to oversee the multiple needs of skilling 500 million people up to 2022. The 500 million came from CK’s India@75 thesis; it was accepted by government and was announced by the President of India in her address to Parliament. Because of his contribution to thinking in the skills area, he was included in the PM’s Council on Skills Development.

CK was always available, at any time, to people who called him for advice and mentoring. But he was always apologetic when he called a person for information or advice. His respect for the time of others was infinite; very often, the calls were preceded by a brief e-mail to ask whether a call was convenient. He never took anyone for granted and never assumed that his own standing and position gave him any rights. And, yet, he taxed himself to respond to other people who reached out to him for information and advice. Since 2007, and his now-famous presentation on India@75

in New York, CK criss-crossed India with CII, speaking to people from all segments of society about India in 2022 and how to get there.

CK was a man who set high standards. First, for himself. And, then, for others. The benchmark was very high. Once, in the '80s, he hosted a dinner at home in Ann Arbor for a team of CII CEOs, to meet the CEOs of Ford and other major corporates in the Detroit area. His home was some distance away and the drivers of the two cars took a couple of wrong turnings to reach a few minutes late. This was just not on for CK. He made his displeasure known. He expected, rightly, that the CII team would be there before the guests arrived. This quality in CK stayed right through his life. And, as a consequence, he raised the standards of others in terms of punctuality, commitment and conduct.

CK believed in the Indian corporate sector. And, he spent days, months, years on teaching corporate leaders, especially in India, about their potential, their role, their competitiveness, their growth, their contribution. He managed to impact so many people to believe in themselves, to have self-esteem and self-confidence, to evolve, to be successful, to be competitive, to play a sustained role in the nation. It was an incredible journey with corporate leaders over several decades. They learnt leadership and they learnt values.

He was a legend in his lifetime, and a book will surely appear with anecdotes and real stories. But the amazing commitment, consistency, values of CK were such that, for 25 years, he worked with CII, helping frame the agenda for action here. From manufacturing, to competitiveness, to entrepreneurship, to low-cost products and services, to India@75, to Skills, we were his umbilical cord, his platform, his partner; even when, on occasion CII failed, he was forgiving, reaching out, never giving up. CK will remain central to our lives, perhaps, as much in his passing as in his lifetime.

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