

The Desi Drucker – Decoding the VUCA World in Daadi’s Way

From Graduation to Seeking 1st Job

I aspired to work in the Government with the Ministry and be part of the Policy formulation process. So, I studied Masters in Public Policy at National University of Singapore and graduated in July 2019. I was on the Deans’ list and one of the top performers of my batch. During my final semester, I interviewed with a Government agency in India and after 3 grueling rounds I was offered the job with a Ministry; I was due to join them starting from August 2019. With my dream job in hand and Master’s degree from one of the World’s Best Universities, I was on cloud 9 when I returned to India.

In August 2019, when contacted the government officials, I was told that the Minister who recruited me, his party lost the election. A New government formed; the New Minister informed me about reshuffling things, setting a fresh team headed by a Secretary starting from the New Year and I was assured that I will be joining the team as a deputy to the incoming Secretary. So, I spent next few months relaxing with family and used all my savings that I earned as Research Assistant at the University for an exotic vacation to Bali with my girlfriend.

2020 Arrived – Eagerly, I went to the Minister’s Office who directed me to the newly appointed Secretary. We discussed about pressing policies, my Singapore experiences and then came the shock - the Secretary told me that the New Year that the Minister referred to was not January 2020, but it is April 2020 – the start of the New Financial Year. The Secretary assured me of my job and added that I shall be a key member of his team with demanding responsibilities. On a parting note the Secretary advised me to spend time with family and finish off all important personal and domestic works in the next 3 months as I shall be very much occupied with the Ministry’s work starting from April 2020.

I gave the update to my family. Foreseeing a hectic schedule & challenging work, I proposed the idea of getting married to my girlfriend. We got married in February 2020 and went to Maldives for our Honeymoon and got back home in mid-March 2020. During March last week, India announced the nation - wide lockdown owing to Covid 19 pandemic. I thought Covid 19 was just flu and did not worry much. In April 2020, I was informed by the Ministry that my joining was

further postponed until the lockdown rules were relaxed. What I thought would be just a week's delay turned into a month to 3 months and to November 2020.

During the lockdown, I lived with my Parents and survived on my Wife's Salary. I got very comfortable at home binge watching Netflix. For the next 6 months with no physical activity, no serious work and over indulgent eating, I gained 15 kilos of weight. Time flew so quickly and it was already a year since I graduated. All this while, I never wrote to any of my professors or friends. Despite my family suggesting me to look for other jobs, I was very stubborn and for me working with the Ministry was the dream job. I told myself I still had a job and the delay was just bad circumstances.

“All funding Diverted to Covid 19 Relief, All Job Offers Cancelled, Stay Safe & All the Best” – I received this message on my mobile from the Secretary. This shattered me; I was in denial state for next few days. I braved Covid 19 and met the Minister; but all efforts went in vain. I spent sleepless nights eating junk food; I was at my worst behaviour, I kept complaining about everything and slowly lost confidence. When I reached out to a senior who was kind enough to get me a job interview call, I messed up the interview. I failed to answer about my own thesis I wrote during my Masters. I felt I lost my touch, I became depressed. This affected not just my life, but also my family and marital life. My family remained supportive and they decided to send me to my grandmother in the village.

The Village and the Daadi¹

I reached my Daadi's place in Palteru in Andhra Pradesh in South India. Palteru is a remote village with many houses still not having access to continuous electricity, tap water, sanitation facilities. In the village, I was on a digital detox – no laptops, smart phones or gadgets. In this village, I met a super woman who changed my thinking and approach towards life. Meet Suramma, my grandmother's best friend and here is her inspiring story.

¹ Grandmother is referred to as Daadi and Desi means Country Side/ Rural in many Indian languages

Before Covid 19

Suramma never went to school; she was married at 14. Unable to cope up with agricultural debts, Suramma's husband committed suicide in late 90s. Suramma worked in the village's school as a Cook preparing mid-day meals for school children. Suramma's son Raju dropped out of school after Class 5 and became a migrant labour in the construction Industry. Working across cities like Hyderabad and Bangalore, he returned to the village during the crop harvest season every year. Raju is married to Rani and they had a 4 year old daughter. Rani and the kid stayed with Suramma. Suramma had a milch cow and half acre land around the house where the family grew paddy. Suramma's daughter in law was a tailor in the village and when she had no tailoring work, she worked as daily wager in the agricultural fields. On an average Suramma earned about Rs 2000 (\$27) while tailoring gave Rani around Rs 1500 (\$20) every month.

Despite being an illiterate, Suramma was inquisitive, curious and asked lots of questions to the School Teachers about current affairs. Suramma was kind and social. She worked very hard – cooked meals, practiced agriculture, milked cow and took care of the family. This was Suramma's life before Covid 19.

The Crisis - Covid 19 & the Lock Down

India went into complete lockdown from 24th March 2020; with great trouble Raju managed to reach his village from Hyderabad in early April. The School was closed; there was no work for anyone. The family saw no possible money coming during lockdown. Suramma's only mission was her family's survival and overcoming this crisis period – her family became her organization and she assumed the CEO role to handle this imminent life threatening crisis. Suramma's first decision was - unlike every season, this time she stocked the rice for family instead of selling it to the wholesaler. By this Suramma secured staple food sufficient enough to survive the crisis.

As a cook in the government school, Suramma received training on nutrition and foods that must be given to school children; she sensed that this pandemic shall create huge demand for immunity booster foods. While most of the village grew paddy and cotton Suramma grew leafy vegetables this season. Around the half acre, Suramma's family cultivated Spinach, Fenugreek, Coriander, Leeks etc. Suramma's decision of growing leafy vegetables gave her a source of income that was quick and consistent.

The School Principal was a Bachelor who came from a city and lived in the village. Due to lock down, Suramma cooked food for him every day and he paid money for this. In early April, the School Principal told Suramma to wear a mask when she visited his home. Suramma was greatly influenced by this; she went back to Rani and asked if she could stitch a mask. Immediately, she took Rani to the government doctor in the town and asked her advice for designing the mask. The doctor gave them a mask and suggested to stitch a double layered cloth mask. Within a week, Rani stitched 3 types of masks and showed to the doctor. When the doctor approved it, Suramma told they could stitch double layered cloth masks for the hospital if there was an opportunity or need in the future.

In May, Village governing bodies decided to distribute 3 masks per person in the village. When the village headmen met the government doctor seeking advice about masks, the doctor suggested them to procure from Suramma's family as they had the knowledge to stitch right type of masks. The local village body placed order for 50,000 masks. As Covid cases spiked, Suramma's family got more orders – including from other village governing bodies and local health clinics. Over next 6 months, Suramma employed her school staff (Peon, Gardener, Helper) who all lost their source of incomes during lockdown and together stitched nearly 300,000 cloth masks.

In June, when Suramma went to her relative's village the School Principal ordered food using a mobile app. Upon knowing this Suramma thought the Principal was joking and then the Principal again ordered food using the mobile app; in the next 40 minutes Suramma saw a guy on a bike delivering the food to the Principal's home. Suramma could not believe this; she saw for the 1st time in her life – a food delivery using mobile app.

Raju was becoming restless without work and lack of alcohol worsened things. Suramma realized that Raju must be engaged in some task or he could create troubles. Suramma figured a way for his son. The school remained closed in the new academic year and the Principal was leaving to his native place. Knowing this Suramma requested the Principal if he could leave his 2 wheeler motor bike for her son until he returned to village. When the Principal bought the bike to Suramma's house, she asked Raju to give his smart phone to the Principal and requested him to show the mobile app. Sensing the intentions of Suramma, the Principal asked Raju if he would like to ride bike and deliver food. With the help of Principal, Suramma managed to get Raju the

food delivery boy job with a leading food delivery app in India by July. Ravi enjoyed this job as it was less tiresome but earnings were higher than his manual job.

Covid 19 Crisis – Loss of Lives & Livelihoods

Covid 19 hit India very badly with as high 400,000 cases and 4000+ deaths on a daily basis; most of the people who either lost their lives or their livelihoods were people like Suramma and her family – the daily wage workers were the worst affected. While Covid 19 attacked the health of a person, the lockdown completely shattered the livelihoods of the millions of people across villages of India; people died of hunger and malnutrition.

The below facts illustrate the intensity and magnitude of the crisis that Suramma dealt

- About 126 million people lost their jobs when the lockdown was imposed in April 2020 and out of them 90 million were daily wagers²
- The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy reported that 97% of Indians became poorer post Covid 19³.
- A report by Azim Premji University concluded that 230 million Indians were pushed back into poverty because of Covid 19⁴.
- Pew Research Centre reported that 75 million people earning less than \$2 a day fell back into the poverty trap⁵.
- India ranked 94th out of 107 countries on the Global Hunger Index 2020⁶.
- As I write this, over 350,000 people in India lost their lives during Covid 19 pandemic⁷.

² https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/a-recovery-to-worry-120081001261_1.html

(Vyas 2020)

³ <https://scroll.in/article/996028/97-of-indians-have-been-left-poorer-by-the-pandemic-says-economist-mahesh-vyas> (Scroll 2021)

⁴ https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/230-million-indians-pushed-into-poverty-amid-covid-19-pandemic-report-121050600751_1.html (Business Standard 2021)

⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/18/in-the-pandemic-indias-middle-class-shrinks-and-poverty-spreads-while-china-sees-smaller-changes/> (PEW Research Centre 2021)

⁶ International Food Policy Research Institute, 2021, India, Global Hunger Index, <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/india.html>. (International Food Policy Research Institute 2021)

⁷ <https://www.covid19india.org/> (Covid 19 India DashBoard 06)

My Reflections & Insights

After listening to Suramma and watching her journey during the crisis times, I reflected about my own actions since graduation and picked up few insights

- Having thousands of social media connections does not mean you are creating value. Stop bragging about the count.
- Do not let the A+ grades and Ivy League tags fool you to get anything anytime; the real world does not work like that.
- Complacency kills Competency. Beware!
- Never trust a Politician; pardon my sarcasm – but never take anything for granted. Always look for the details, there lies the devil.
- The World is unpredictable; if bad luck can hit just 1 in a million people, always be prepared assuming you to be that 1 in the million guys and have a Plan B, C & so on.
- Being Stubborn is different from being passionate. Know the difference.
- Situations and Times always fluctuate, there shall be great highs and devastating lows – So, learn to deal both good and bad times.
- There is nothing called Dream job – it's a fad and don't fall for it.
- Never marry hurriedly because you will become busy, marry only when you are ready – now stop assuming about my marital life, I am a lucky guy. My wife's the best.
- Your choices and decisions define who you are and what you are – Your Academic Degrees are just a piece of Paper. Accept it.
- When things are beyond your control, do not become desperate, it only creates more frustration – Instead Accept it and Embrace the Hardship, But Do not Escape.
- Irrespective of you are Gen Y, Gen Z or a Millennial; no matter how technologically advanced you are – Always Remember the Basics as simple as Good Manners, Effective Communication, Humility – they take you a long way in life.
- Change is the only thing that is Constant. Period
- Last but not the least, Learn to manage yourself first before managing a job, team or an organization.

Lessons from Desi Drucker – Daadi Version

- In Drucker's words to Manage Oneself⁸ one needs to know about their own skillset, strengths, weaknesses and other traits. In this case, Suramma knew her limitations, strength, opportunities and was pragmatic with her approach to deal the crisis.
- Drucker said that problems are opportunities in disguise⁹ – The Covid 19 pandemic was a great threat yet Suramma created opportunities with her green leafs and stitching masks ideas. She read the situations very sharply and was prepared.
- Lockdown disrupted the Routine; but Suramma understood this complexity and made necessary adjustments. In Peter Drucker's version it is all about being ahead of change¹⁰.
- As Drucker tells Why predict a future when you can create it¹¹, Suramma showed how it's done. Suramma dealt uncertainty and created the future she wanted by effectively managing the situations and sound decision making.
- Despite being illiterate, Suramma with her sheer hard work and ability to connect the dots implemented small innovations – like planting green leafs instead of paddy, stitching masks when hardly anyone were wearing, etc. In Drucker's own words – Innovation is not a flash of genius¹², but hardwork and Suramma serves as a testimony to it.
- Drucker once said Balancing change and continuity requires continuous work on information¹³. Suramma's entire success story was built on her gathering information and creating value out of it.

What Crisis Demands of a Manager – My Take

As a Public Policy Graduate, I researched on how to decode the VUCA world – the world that is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. In this VUCA world Suramma was the most vulnerable and volatile to the crisis owing to her socio economic status, her family's future was highly uncertain with everyone in the family losing out on their livelihood, the pandemic brought a world full of complexities to which Suramma had not even the faintest of the idea and when

⁸ <https://hbr.org/2005/01/managing-oneself>

⁹ <https://hbr.org/2002/08/the-discipline-of-innovation>

¹⁰ <https://hbr.org/1997/09/looking-ahead-implications-of-the-present>

¹¹ Quote by Peter F Drucker picked from his interview (1991) (Drucker 2002) (Peter F Drucker 1997) (Drucker, <https://hbr.org/2005/01/managing-oneself> 2005)

¹² <https://hbr.org/2002/08/the-discipline-of-innovation>

¹³ The Effective Executive (1967) by Peter F Drucker

most of the world leaders, top CEO's, leading personalities from academia and industry were facing ambiguity in dealing this crisis, what are the odds that a country side illiterate grandmother living below poverty line in India shall successfully deal the crisis?

We both are poles apart. On Paper, I had Master's degree, travelled 17 countries, had friends from 5 continents, 5000+ connections on social media, tech savvy and on the other end was Suramma, a 50 odd old illiterate Daadi in a village who cooked meals for kids and milked cow. But you ask who dealt the crisis well – Hands down, it's the Grandmother.

Suramma's decision making had no BCG matrix, but still she figured out that Greeny leafs would be her Cash cow than growing paddy; she never knew about SWOT analysis, but her approach right from the beginning of the Crisis was all about finding the best fit to secure the family's future. She never heard of Kotter's Theory of Change, but still sensed the urgency to change things according to the circumstances; her choices might not have had a backdrop of board room meetings & simulation exercises, but Suramma's managing of crisis was no less than to any CEO of a Fortune 500 Company. In a nutshell, she implemented many things which are taught as Management lessons to the MBA grads.

Having studied topics such as Decoding VUCA World, Conflict Management, etc. here I am still being a Couch Potato, stupid enough to not believe that Pandemic will not impact my world and unable to manage myself. It was only in the village, I saw for myself how people less fortunate at the bottom of the pyramid, not even educated and without any great access to technology, but were still able to deal the crisis with resilience and zest; it is here in this village I realized that Crisis Management does not come from reading books or listening to Motivational Talks; but at the core it is more about applying the human values, its spirit as responses to the abnormal situations - unflinching attitude of never giving up, staying calm in the face of the crisis, clarity of thought beneath the labyrinth of complexities and ambiguities and that is how a Successful Crisis Manager decodes the VUCA World. I have studied just concepts in school, but learnt the reality the Daadi way to deal crisis in the village. Suramma is my Desi Drucker and she taught me to decode this VUCA World.

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