

GOPI'S FARM

by Henry Mintzberg

Gopi grins a lot. So I didn't take him seriously when I met him. That was my first mistake.

Gopi lives in the city, where he does his deals, and escapes to his farm, where he grows coconuts. So I took him to be a gentleman farmer. That was my second mistake.

The city is Bangalore, in southern India. Bustling Bangalore, where Gopi bustles. Now it's helicopters. And bread. Before that, irrigation systems. Honda dealerships, and lots more.

Deccan Aviation, "Your limousine in the sky," will do most anything its helicopters can do. Like just getting to Bangalore the first time, from Singapore. Gopi signed the contract ten minutes before the helicopter had to take off. He and his partner pilot flew it over Malaysia, then Thailand, then Burma, then Bangladesh, and finally down the Indian subcontinent, stopping every few hundred kilometers—twenty times in five days—for liquid refreshments. A very thirsty helicopter indeed. "No destination is impossible. No boundaries exist," Deccan's promotion claims, with some authority. They have six helicopters now, or at least they did when I wrote this, only to get an e-mail that Gopi was expecting three more.

Bread was in the family, at least in K.T.'s family—a famous old bakery in Bangalore. K.T. married Gopi's sister. Franchising is the thing, Gopi decided, so

now he takes care of that. He would like to open one in London. You have to call it “Gopi’s Bakery,” I kid him, and be sure to put underneath, “Let them eat bread.”

Bhargavi is Gopi’s wife. She runs production. Ye Gods, I thought before I met Bhargavi, he’s married to a bakery boss. Poor Gopi. That was another mistake. Bhargavi is small and adorable. You would never guess that she runs a bakery, let alone is the mother of Parlavi, aged 17, whose soft, shy look could stop a helicopter, and Kritike, 11, who dances around the house like a little lady Gopi.

The Gopi family is urban. So I was surprised when, shortly after meeting Bhargavi on our way to buy a couple of bicycles, she said, “I miss the farm so much.” There were almost tears in her eyes.

It’s four hours to the farm by car, and with the kids in school, which is why they moved to Bangalore, Bhargavi rarely gets back there for more than a few days at a time. You will understand her feelings when you find out how Bhargavi came to the farm.

Captain Gorur R. Iyengar Gopinath left the Indian Army at the age of 27, thanks to a signature he wrangled out of some high official. He returned home to find his native village in crisis. A dam had been built that flooded the ancestral lands. The government paid compensation, but that was only money—and quickly being used up. Other land was offered, but at some distance, and suspect by everyone. Except Gopi. He decided to go have a look. So he hopped on a motorcycle, and when the road ended, he walked the last four kilometers through the bush. He came back and offered to buy everyone’s land for deferred payment in five years. Better than nothing, they agreed.

Gopi was determined to grow coconuts on that land. So he took a kid named Raju from the village, pitched an army tent, and they began to plant little coconut trees. Then the rains came, and carried the little coconut trees away. So they began again, planting them earlier and more solidly. In the dry season, with no sign of the promised electricity, Gopi and Raju carried water to the trees by hand, one pail on each side. A thousand little trees each thirsty for about four pitchers of water a week.

Almost a year of that and Gopi began to dream of donkeys. So he found a deal—four donkeys for ninety rupees each (about \$7 in those days). He got his money's worth: they were even less enthusiastic about carrying water than was Gopi, and, tired of grazing, they insisted on eating the beans Gopi had grown to sell. The local farmers come to look and laugh. Mercifully the electricity arrived soon after.

When the time came to get Gopi married, a match was proposed, in proper Indian fashion. Bhargavi and her mother and sisters set out in a bullock cart to visit the farm. Gopi loves to tell this story. (Actually Gopi loves to tell all his stories.) Bullock carts have two huge wooden wheels that rock back and forth through the ruts. So it's a good idea to put in the little pins that keep the wheels in place. Otherwise a proposed marriage could end up in the mud. Well, on arrival, after an hour of this rocking, it was discovered that someone forgot to put in the pins. Someone else, apparently, was looking after Gopi and Bhargavi.

But they were not out of the mud yet. Bhargavi's mother took one look at the scene and warned her daughter off this crazy marriage. Coconut trees take ten

years to mature; what would they eat in the meantime, and in a tent at that? But proper Indian marriage or not, Bhargavi had made up her mind. So Gopi got a wife as determined as he.

They planted coconut trees together, Gopi and Bhargavi, and gradually earned their farm. In the meantime, they lived off silk cocoons, and in a mud house with a thatched roof that Gopi was able to build in place of the tent. After Parlavi came along, and had to go to school, the family moved to Hassan, near Bhargavi's village, where Gopi started to do his deals. Later they moved to Bangalore, a bigger city with better schools and bigger deals, while they continued to tend the land they love.

Like lots of people who do deals, Gopi wears a Rolex watch. Like them, he's proud of his watch. But they bought their watches. Gopi earned his.

On the back is inscribed "The Rolex Award for Enterprise," with Gopi's name. But not the kind of enterprise you might imagine. This international award was in recognition of Gopi's contribution to organic farming. The fancy book that accompanied the watch cites his work to "expand ecological silk-farming to improve living standards." It explains that, after failing with various crops, followed by dismal results with silkworm rearing, Gopi "switched his approach radically."

There followed a string of innovations. To grow mulberry berries to feed the silk worms, "Gopinath...does not plough the land. Instead he covers it with a thick carpeting of mulch..." (One newspaper wrote that the Rolex Awards are given to people who "break new ground.") Moreover, "Gopinath protects his

silkworms without powdered disinfectants or fungicides... To keep out rats, he instilled a low electrified fence outside. Mosquito nets guard access to the rearing houses. Water channels prevent ants from invading the premises.”

Gopi sent me a big pile of articles on his organic farming, some written by him, others about him. There are technical papers presented at conferences and practical papers published in farmers’ magazines. A comment Gopi made to a national newspaper, *The Hindu*, shows how he thinks.

Farmers and people from the agricultural department advised me to keep the soil “clean” and use chemicals to prevent termite attack. I posed the question: If termites are indeed so lethal how could forests have survived over thousands of years? Termites ought to have slowly assaulted and reduced them to dust. But forests have survived. So have termites... I supposed the termites must have lived off the litter and the debris that you find on the floor of the forests. I sought to create a similar environment here on the farm... I dumped the debris closely around the trunk of the trees as mulch, hoping that the termites would find it as rewarding to feed off the debris as off the trees. And, I discovered to my surprise that instead of attacking the trunk, the termites attacked the mulch and found it delicious. They left the trees alone.

Another article, in a magazine called *The March of Karnataka*—his home state—tells about the water.

He noticed the depletion of ground water and the stream running along the farm going dry soon after rainy season. He had read about “zero cultivation” resulting in increase of water table. A thirty foot width of land along the stream was left uncultivated. Soon shrubs began to grow... and trees began to emerge. The weeds were left free. Before he knew it the erosion was stopped. Water holding capacity increased. The microhabitat was revitalised. Insects, birds and earthworm population increased. Deposition of humus increased, leading to increase in soil fertility. Water table shot up.

Anything but donkeys!

Gopi is a big fan of weeds and pests. Some weeds should be kept and recycled, he told a reporter. They “indicate a healthy soil...” And farmers should “budget a portion of the harvest for insects and for rodents.” They “aerate and enrich the soil with their droppings and carcasses. You can’t kill the pests without killing the rest” he said, so “we will not fret or get desperate at the sight of a rat nibbling a coconut, for instance, if we understand the intricate, benign workings of nature.” To Gopi the soil is not inanimate: “Agriculture,” he told another newspaper reporter, “is not a physical science, but a life science.”

Back when I still knew Gopi as a gentleman farmer, he invited me to his farm. Actually, he lured me with there with a proposal that we go bicycling, a deal he knew I couldn’t refuse. He hadn’t been on a bike since his army days, when one was issued to all the junior officers to get them around the base.

That is how I came to accompany Bhargavi to the bicycle store in Bangalore. Better not an ordinary bike, I thought, for the likes of this grinning Gopi I did not know. So we got two snazzy ones: semi-mountain bikes with five gears and flat handlebars—the works in India. Sixty bucks each, in a land where these 2¢ rupees are worth about a dollar to much of the population. Next day off we went, the bikes tucked into the back of a little van Gopi had rented.

“It must have been quite a mess,” someone remarked later when I said I had been to an organic farm. Images of debris rotting naturally everywhere, not to mention all those weeds and pests. Another mistake.

We arrive at this lovely place—secluded, perfectly neat, beautifully cared for. Tall palm trees loaded with coconuts grace the entire area, the leaves crinkling in the wind. Another world. No wonder Bhargavi loves this place. We are greeted by a tall, handsome man. Raju is his name, still here, now looking after the whole operation. Various small buildings appear, including a proper Indian house now. You squat over the toilet, pour water on yourself for a shower, sleep on a hard bed, and have dinner outdoors by an open fire, under the palm trees, after a drink of sweet coconut juice with rum, Gopi’s favorite. There are no deals here, and the mobile phone, like the worries, stopped working on the road from Bangalore. (Gopi is a terror back in Bangalore on his mobile phone.)

There is peace among the palm trees as we walk along at sunset, Gopi telling me stories non-stop, a farmfull of stories. I hear about the leopard who came in at night and dragged off the dogs, one by one. (Sounds like the pest has become a pet.) He’s still out here somewhere, Gopi assures me, like the cobras.

Most of the stories concern Gopi's experiments. He points to a ring around a tree, where the mess is ordered into that "delicious" mulch for the insects. At one end of the farm, near the building where the silkworms are reared, Gopi shows me a structure with walls of plastic sheeting that can be rolled up and down, and the roof retracted. For years Gopi wanted to get his silkworms into an outdoor atmosphere, where they could be ventilated naturally. On television, he had seen the new dome stadiums with retractable roofs. But that was a little costly—even for Gopi. Then he came across these structures in Holland, where they are used for growing tulips. So he brought in a Dutch guy to build one, to check if he could adapt it to his silkworms.

Back at the house, sitting on the veranda, Gopi points to a lump of leaf hanging over us. It's a tree ant colony, he explains, and pokes a hole in it, lifting up a bit of the leaf to show me the activity inside. We watch in fascination as the ants pull back the bit and knit the tear closed in a few minutes.

Gopi takes special pride in picking up ideas from other farmers and feeding back what he finds out. "Farmers from every nook and corner of the state visit his farm regularly," wrote the *March of Karnataka*, "and he is always willing to give tips to modify their methods." (I'll bet.) They still come to look, but no longer to laugh. Nonetheless Gopi is concerned that "any talk of 'farming with nature'" can make a person seem like a "Luddite", on the "fringe community of farmers." Not that it stops him: you can't be "a natural farmer in isolation when farmers all around you are spraying poison," Gopi has written.

The next day we are off cycling. Can we find a quiet road, with not too much traffic, I had asked. You could say that Gopi complied. Until mid afternoon, every vehicle we see is capable of running on grain: all three or four of them, bullock carts and bicycles.

“I’ll bet he stopped and had to explain every tree to you,” his sister said to me, laughing, a few days later in Bangalore. Not quite every tree, I replied, although Gopi did explain every single mango tree in bloom, his special favorite. Actually Gopi has all sorts of favorites, so we were off the bikes more than on. When we stopped at an exquisite tree flowered with “Flames of the Forest”, Gopi said, “I wish I were a bee Henry!” A helicopter with honey! I think he was serious.

Eventually we reach a small town where we visit a temple and get red dots on our foreheads from the Hindu priest, a friend of Gopi who invites us home for tea. After that, a brief stop for adjustments at a local bike shop brings out a crowd of kids; even the owner has never seen a bicycle with gears before. Then it’s on to paved roads back to the farm, with the occasional bus and truck going by.

A kid follows us on his bike. What a pest. Go away kid, I think to myself. Then I hear an enthusiastic “This is much better!” and I turn around to see a grinning Gopi on the kid’s bike, a temporary deal having been struck to the delight of both parties.

The following day Gopi has arranged to visit his friend Sunil, who runs his family’s coffee plantation a couple of hours farther west. So it’s back in the van. The road is beautiful, surrounded by coconut farms—lots of coconut farms. This is a pretty competitive business, I think to myself. Not like helicopters.

When we arrive in mountainous country, with stunning scenery, I muse about cycling it. In no time it's decided. Next year we shall do just that, from Sunil's coffee plantation back to Gopi's farm. As we drive along, Gopi keeps upping the ante. We'll camp along the way, he says. Hey, how about if Raju drives ahead and sets up a tent at night. He can prepare dinner for our arrival, not to mention sweet coconut juice with rum. Maybe the family would like to come too. How about eight days? Mercifully the drive ends before he has us biking to Srinagar in the Himalayas.

Sunil has built himself a new house near the top of the mountain plantation. What a house! Marble everywhere, incredibly appointed, impeccably clean. We walk down to the valley where the coffee beans are being husked and washed. Sunil explains that chemicals are added to the residue for treatment before it is released into the river. I can hear Gopi's mind start up, like one of his helicopters. "Why don't you just pump it back up the hill?" You are not allowed to do that, Sunil explains. There are rules about these things. Gopi is gazing off; "rules" don't figure in his scheme of things.

The next day we walk through the plantation. The land is as clean as the house. But Gopi is looking beyond the cleanliness. His mind is in high gear, spinning off one suggestion after another.

He looks at the leaves, which are covered with white spots, and tells me that these are the most oversprayed places on earth. ("Coffee-growers drench their plantations with pesticides and fungicides.... and saturate their crops with chemical fertilizer," he had written in a newspaper.) "Why don't you isolate one

section and try different things?” Gopi says to Sunil, who replies, “I should do that.”

Wait a minute, I think to myself: If this is a “plantation”, why is Gopi’s place a “farm”? On farms, you reap what you sow. On plantations, you reap some byproduct of what you sow. If Gopi plants palm trees to harvest coconuts, what does he farm?

Then I remember yesterday, all those “farms” along the road: coconuts being a competitive business. In Bangalore, I can buy one--a big heavy coconut--for eight rupees. And the guy cuts it open for me and throws in a straw. He will even carve a section out after I am done drinking to fashion a spoon so that I can scoop out the white stuff. All that, shipped all the way from these “farms,” for eight rupees. Do you know how many coconuts it takes to get what Gopi gets for an hour in one of those limousines in the sky: ten thousand! No, Gopi can’t be in it for the coconuts. The deal is just not sustainable. Yet Gopi is most determinedly in it. So what’s the deal?

Then it hits me: Gopi *is* a farmer after all. His is not a plantation to grow coconuts; it’s a farm to grow ideas. Conventional farmers exploit; Gopi explores. He plants experiments, fertilizes them with imagination, and harvests the ideas that take root. These he offers on the open market for the price of our attention.

If you think that’s cheap, then you are making what could be our final mistake. For these ideas takes a great deal of human determination to explore. It is so much easier to keep the environment clean by the application of chemicals. That

is why the world is such a mess. And that is why I have written the story of Gopi's farm.

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