

The Shinkansen economist

Anjuli Bhargava races to keep pace with Muralidharan's breakneck speed train of thought on effective governance

Meeting Karthik Muralidharan over Zoom is like running into the Japanese Shinkansen (bullet train) at full throttle. I have in the past come across a few others like him: People whose brain works at a pace the rest of their faculties fail to match, but most jumble up some thoughts in the process. Muralidharan is an exception.

After a few niceties, he plunges straight into his life story, taking me on so many roller coasters that I struggle to remain steady. I am relieved to see he does occasionally pause to catch his breath as I worry he will choke on his thoughts, which are diverse, insightful and quite fascinating. It's 9.30 pm when I log in from Dehradun, blissfully unaware of what awaits me over the next two hours. He's with his mug of coffee at 8 am at his home in San Diego.

After Class 10 in Ahmedabad, Muralidharan, at 16, won a scholarship to study a mix of the sciences and economics at a school in Singapore. Armed with a lethal combination of his father's love for "facts, figures and precision" and his mother's love for "words, images and descriptions", the young Indian topped his Chinese-speaking class to secure a seat at Harvard to study economics.

Influenced deeply by Amartya Sen's work, he followed in his footsteps in the fall of 1998 as the Eben Fiske scholar from Harvard to Trinity College. Sen won his Nobel Prize within six weeks of them both landing at Cambridge!

Muralidharan repeatedly insists it was "luck" that played a role in his destiny but I take that with a fistful of salt: How many are *lucky* enough to top every class they've taken or to be in corridor conversations with no less than five Nobel laureates? His PhD advisor was 2019 joint Nobel prize winner Michael Kremer; he's taken classes with Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo; he's currently co-chair of the education programme of the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL); and his present office at the University of California in San Diego was occupied by Clive Granger, the Nobel Prize winner for economics in 2003.

Albeit short, Muralidharan's stint in Singapore was transformative in many ways. The rise of the young nation gave him an insight into what sensible economic policy could achieve when strategic government intervention combined well with market incentives. It

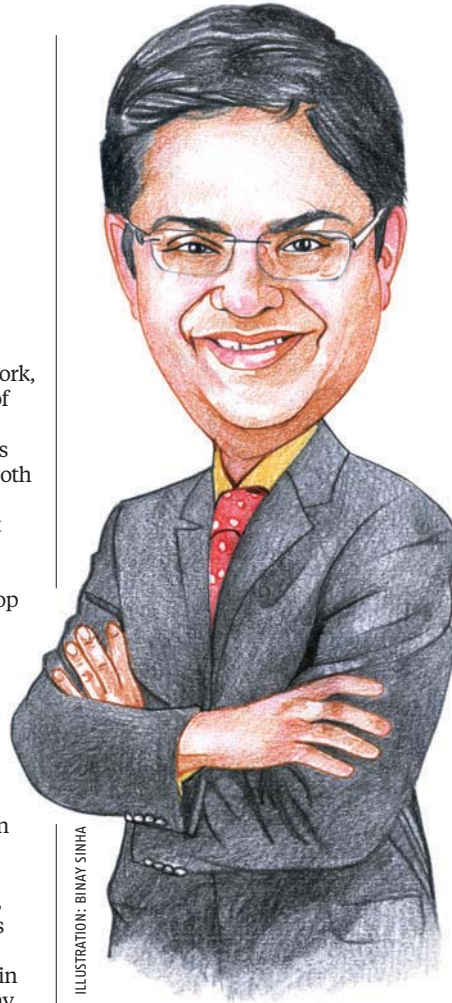


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was here that he came to another conclusion, one he read later in Nobel prize winner Robert Lucas's 1988 paper: Once you start thinking about the disparities in per capita income and

which policies could make a difference, you can't think about anything else.

Singapore also piqued his curiosity in the private sector enough for him to delay his PhD at Harvard and head to work at Bain Consulting's Singapore office for two years in 1999 in an attempt to understand what drives private capital with a view to apply his learnings in public interest. The experience inculcated in him a set of skills including working at a scale with governments that doctorates typically don't. An unabashed overachiever, he even made time to take classes in Chinese at Harvard and is now fluent in five languages.

By 26, Muralidharan was the youngest invitee at the annual Neerama jamborees that connected India's top technocrats and policymakers with economists from around the world. This allowed him to introduce his own deeply researched findings into the country's education landscape, many of which found their way into India's 12th Plan document and more recently the National Education Policy, 2020.

Through this period (2006-2015), he continued to function from his strictly non-partisan academic perch at the University of California, peppered with regular visits to India. "I knew by then that one's ability to get anything actually done in government — even as chief economic advisor — was rather limited but you could, for instance, veto a truly hair-brained idea more easily," he laughs. Holding an honorary additional secretary rank allows him to engage with policymakers at a more intimate level without losing his freedom.

But even as some of his key ideas made their way into India's education circuitry, Muralidharan was forced to stare at a

larger problem: India's elite had completely seceded from being recipients of public services and built moats around themselves that left them oblivious and indifferent to a "hollowed-out" state. His deep commitment to India, sown in him by his grandfather and father who had been engrossed in the frenetic nation building post-Independence, wouldn't allow him to turn a blind eye to this. "Be good and do good," I learn is his life's motto, with the latter possible only after one achieves the former.

That was the seminal moment, sometime in 2016-17, for the birth of the Centre for Effective Governance for Indian States (CEGIS) of which he is founder and scientific director. The seed of that idea would catapult him from a thinker to a doer. Professors of top research universities can be, to his mind, a bit like "start-up entrepreneurs" working with "ideas" instead of a product but going through the same motions: Raising grants instead of funding, hiring researchers (HR), doing the research (manufacturing), publishing papers (marketing) and finally communicating the findings through different mediums (sales). The academic perch offers a "stability" that entrepreneurs are bereft of and the "luxury of time" that fire-fighting bureaucrats lack. Having reached a sort of inflection point at 45, he felt he had invested 20 years "building his own capacities" and could now spend the next 20 years "delivering on that".

His thoughts resonated closely with the founder of India's education think

tank, Central Square Foundation (CSF), Ashish Dhawan, who decided to fund the new effort.

With no time to be lost, CEGIS has hit the ground running and started work with the Telangana government even as the search for a CEO is on. Meanwhile, Muralidharan is rejigging his own life to see how he can give this new baby the undivided attention he thinks it deserves, fully cognisant of the fact that there is no guarantee of success.

Two hours have flown by on this mind-boggling express train as I glean many other aspects of his personality, including his ability to look upon the positives and a never-say-die disposition. I end by asking how his family, his wife in particular, keeps pace. If this is what two hours entail, how do those who face this daily cope? He

laughs uproariously and says as far as possible he now attempts to separate his intellectual and professional pursuits from his family life. His wife, who he tried to draw into every aspect in the initial days, no longer makes a pretence of keeping pace! The lockdown gave him a breather and an opportunity to hike in San Diego's pristine environs with her and their two small children, precious time with many moments to treasure.

It's 11.30 pm India time and I get a sense that he is finally winding down. Finished? Wild fantasy on my part as we chat for another 15-20 minutes. When we finally call it a day, I realise here is someone who has lived the first part of his life's motto — "be good" — to perfection. The "do good" bit is to now follow.

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