

# Silicon Valley's Raju Reddy Finds Sandbox to Drive Change In Rural India

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April 3, 2022



In rural Telangana the flamingos take flight, blackbucks jostle and a quiet school teacher crouched in the grass watches them through his own lens. **Raju Reddy**, a serial entrepreneur and founder of **Kakatiya Sandbox**, discovered that the near-extinct blackbuck played close to his foundation's headquarters in his ancestral Nizamabad.

**Kakatiya Sandbox**, about 150 kilometers from the city of Hyderabad, is also a playground of *desh bhakts* who want to put their shoulder on the wheel of the rural-transformation-Sandbox wagon, a vehicle for the empowerment of the people.

Providing small solutions to big problems. Silicon Valley entrepreneurs like Raju Reddy and **Desh Deshpande** are changing the face of rural India. Back to the homes where their parents live they bring the skills and methods of Silicon Valley to transform communities and build wealth. They support Micro-entrepreneurship, Agriculture, Startup, and Skill development of the community (MASS).

"The aim of the **Kakatiya** Sandbox is to create an environment where innovative approaches to addressing social challenges are encouraged." Cumulatively 2 million lives have been impacted by the **Kakatiya** Sandbox programs over the last 8 years, \$50 m per year incremental income has been created for one lakh families.

"Our success lies in our ability to execute as we not only provide financial resources to our partners but also strategic support, challenging them to impact larger populations and work more efficiently," said Manish Jaiswal, chief executive of the foundation.



Blackbuck playing near Kakatiya Sandbox HQ. (Image Credit: Santhosh Kumar)

## Water For The Biryani

When Hyderabad has mentioned the first image the name conjures is that of the quintessential Hyderabadi biryani, the flavorful rice dish. "Nationwide the most ordered dish for delivery is the biryani," shares **Manish Jaiswal**, CEO of Sandbox. "Swiggy, India's Doordash, reported 6,04,44,000 biryanis were ordered in 2021 by 500 cities. They receive an order for a biryani every second, as per their annual 2021 StatEATstics **report**," said Manish.



Sandbox helps farmers.

The rice paddy grown in the fields of Telangana is fed by the monsoon. Rice cultivation needs a lot of water. Formerly under the Kakatiya kings (1163- 1323 C.E.), Telangana had excellent water management systems with chains of tank networks. Paddy fields were fed with a 'block system' of irrigation based on small tanks that collected and saved rainwater. These historic water bodies that in some cases resemble seas, where the farmer's surface water management resource.

However, when water management was centralized first by the Mughals and then the British, dammed water was centrally disbursed. Independent India followed the same system. Telangana was soon known for drought and farmer suicides.

The **Kakatiya Sandbox's** Farm Pond initiative is working to get the local tanks working again. In tune with nature rather than controlling nature, the farmers construct Farm Ponds in their respective villages to collect rainwater. "This way the farmers have obtained 30-50% higher yield," says Jaiswal.

Until 2020, more than 6000 Farm Ponds have been constructed impacting thousands of lives.

The approximate cost to construct one Farm Pond is INR 80,000. A farmer who wants to build a Farm Pond on his farm will contribute INR 55,000 towards it. Donors help with the INR 25,000 difference in cost. "We are joining hands with the farmer to create a difference," says Jaiswal.

Sandboxers **Ajit Narra** and **Shravya Nalla** are working on sustainability in agriculture. Growing more paddy with less water is being achieved by switching farmers to **System of Rice Intensification** (SRI). 30 to 60 percent less water is used with SRI.

Rice farmers have traditionally flooded rice fields with water to check the growth of weeds. Water blocks sunlight and air to the ground. Substituting low-land flood irrigation with alternate wetting and drying water management in rice helps save the cost of water. Additionally, the plants are planted with airflow between them. "Despite the savings in seed and water cost SRI is not adopted by farmers due to the high cost of transplantation," says Ajit Narra.

The young rice plant has to be transplanted into a larger area. Each plant has to be planted precisely with spacing between plants to ensure the plants are resilient and healthy with deep roots. This backbreaking work increases the labor cost.

Kakatiya Sandbox steps in by doing the transplanting mechanically and thereby mitigating the cost to the farmer.

150 acres are now under SRI.



An Indian farmer near his paddy field.

## TiEing Business Threads Across Continents

Organic brown, black and white rice packets are making their way from the fields of Telangana to the kitchens of Silicon Valley. **Hiten Bhimani** (CEO) of Shree Gajanan Industries in Nizamabad sends the rice to the United States where it is repackaged and sold. "Nizamabad is one of the highest producers of turmeric and Rice," says Jaiswal.

Hiten Bhimani's rice mills are a family business. "When I was thinking how I could add more meaning to my life, the Kakatiya Sandbox inspired us to start collaborating."

Young change-makers like Hiten, **Ajit Narra**, **Shravya Nalla**, **Santhosh Kumar**, **Bharath Dhoni**, **Ravish Bhimani** were encouraged by Raju Reddy to form **TiE's Nizamabad** chapter. 70 members from 40 companies now meet to foster Silicon Valley's startup culture. The business community has banded together and periodically receives guest speakers, professional trainers, and research analysts.

Speaking to the Nizamabad team Desh Deshpande **urged them** to not wait for the government to solve social problems. "Small private groups should innovate with the help of philanthropic money and build models that can be adopted by the government," he said to the Kakatiya Sandbox team.



Upskilling schoolchildren at Sandbox.

## Classroom of Life

Upskilling the youth, women and young, equips them to build national wealth.

A classroom of newly minted accountants, hopeful that their 16-week training will set them up for success in the real world, gathers soft and life skills to add to their academic ones. They can seek self-employment or work in the formal employment sector. Philosophical conversations on what constitutes success and how to get there are thrown in.

For the school dropouts, there is a helpline with a career advisor at the other end. (**The Nirman program** has received over 9,00,000 calls). **Differently-abled people**, who are mostly uneducated and unskilled, receive help to establish a livelihood.

In the adjacent room stand women entrepreneurs who have micro-enterprises giving them independent incomes. A sewing machine, a marketing plan, and business advice. They are on their way to achieving PM Modi's dream of *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*.

**Save a mother program** trains volunteer village health activists to educate, empower and connect pregnant women to public health systems.

Seventh-grade girls with a dream of becoming police officers learn English from well-trained teachers. The teachers are trained by Kakatiya Sandbox and dispersed to government-run schools to hold additional English training classes twice a day for 5th to 8th graders.

In the march ahead, this corner of the country, which was traditionally taught Hindi and not Telugu, now moves with swiftness towards fluency in English at the grassroots level.



Planned HQ for Kakatiya Sandbox Nizamabad. (Image Credit: Kakatiya Sandbox office)

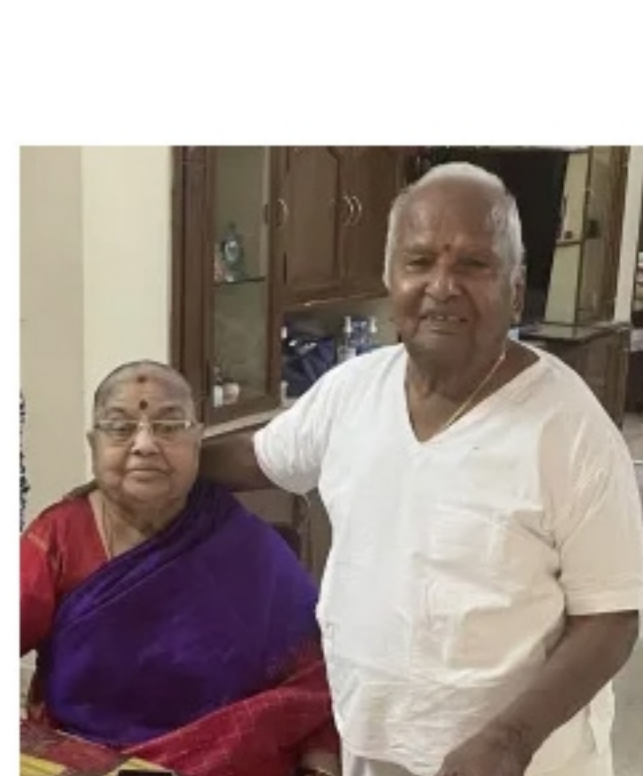
## Going Forward

Manish Jaiswal stands in the flat land that in a few years will be the new anchor home of Kakatiya Sandbox in Nizamabad.

Their present headquarters was built by Ram Reddy, Raju's father, and a civil engineer by training. With a twinkle in his eye, the 90-year-old patriarch looks at his wife.

He sees the young girl he had married. She had walked the walk with him as he had marched to the tune of his nation-building dreams. They were the youth of newly independent India. Their son, Raju's return to Nizamabad with Silicon Valley's know-how and vision was taking Ram's dream to the future generations of Nizamabad. The baton passes into the hand of Sandbox's youth.

The prospect of a new building to house their collective dreams jumps out of the paper into the real world. The flamingos take flight. The blackbuck roams green pastures and the schoolteacher captures a tiger through his lens.



Ram Reddy & his wife