“Trust-based philanthropy is holding us accountable to the ultimate outcomes we have promised for our children.”

A Conversation with Richa Gupta of Labhya

Sanne Breimer
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Sanne Breimer: Please introduce yourself and tell me about your work, and when your venture was founded.

Richa Gupta: I'm Richa Gupta, one of three co-founders of Labhya, which began in 2017. I'm a teacher turned entrepreneur. I spent a decade teaching in low-income classrooms across India, trying to understand the challenges our children faced. I started teaching when I was 16 years old as a volunteer, and I learned there’s a big difference between me teaching and children actually learning. So much was happening to my children outside of the classroom. They were going through a lot, witnessing violence in their communities, in their homes, and they had other vulnerabilities that stopped them from being regulated in the classroom.

My children were too stressed to learn, no matter how engaging I made the classrooms. A turning point for me, unfortunately, was when I lost two students, one to community violence, another to a disease I had recovered from as a child. Beyond how I felt about it, I saw how the rest of the community, the rest of my children, and their parents dealt with it. It seemed like nothing mattered because of where my kids came from. There were no newspaper articles or big news about what happened to them. I started to question my purpose as an educator. During that time, I met my co-founders, Vedant Jain and Malika Taneja, to start what is now Labhya to work on children's wellbeing and mental health in a more systemic way.

At Labhya, I look at programs and overall organizational development. I'm also the CEO, and I currently also serve on the board of Global Fund for Children. I also work

with the United Nations as one of the 17 young leaders for the Sustainable Development Goals. I focus specifically on children's wellbeing and education as a core agenda. Labhya is an India-based education nonprofit that partners with Indian state governments to help them mandate and embed a daily wellbeing class across all public schools. Just like our children have a math, science or English class, they now have a daily 30-minute well-being class. We currently do this in three states, impacting 2.4 million children every single day across 22,000 schools.

Sanne Breimer: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work and how you know it's working? What is it about your approach that led to this success or impact?

Richa Gupta: When we partner with the government, all children in public schools of that state, from grades kindergarten to 8, experience a daily wellbeing class. This includes mindfulness, a secular practice that helps children to be more present. This also includes activities designed with teachers and implemented in low-resource environments, such as interactive activities, storytelling, and expressions.

The class does three things. First, it enables children to become more resilient. They learn coping strategies that help them lifelong through difficult times. Secondly, it builds their relationship skills. This helps children identify their key trusted adults, such as a family member or teacher, and how they can strengthen relationships with these adults so when something bad happens or if something challenging comes their way, they have a good support system. The third is learning motivation. We help children understand the purpose of education. It helps them mindfully focus on education and learning, and see value in education.

For example, one class 7 student had gone through and [heard a story about] a very stubborn child who kept asking her parents for a new notebook or pencil, things like that. In that story, the child also fights with her dad about buying something new and storms out of the house in anger, and by mistake, wears the father's shoes. She realizes those shoes are torn and water is seeping into them. Over the course of the story, she sees her father's wallet and all the loans they've taken to buy cycles and different things for the kids, and basically realizes how much her parents have been doing for her without knowing it. Her attitude shifts, and she starts to help out at home. In real life, this class 7 student did the same. She realized through the story what was happening, and when she went home, she would make space for her mother. When her mother came back from work, she would write thank you notes for them. Their relationship turned around 180 degrees.

Stories like these assure us we are making behavioral changes, but we also have data to prove that our program works. We've seen clinical anxiety levels reduced and learning levels increased because of our program.

Sanne Breimer: Do you collect the data and do research yourself?

Richa Gupta: Yes, both. We track internal data, but we also do external studies to validate the work we do and measure the impact we have.

Sanne Breimer: Thinking about the support you received, what's something that surprised you and turned out to be very helpful to scale your business?

Richa Gupta: When we started Labhya, we were very clear about two things. One, that we would only work with the most vulnerable children. For us, those were children who go to public schools because these schools are free. If someone has no other choice, it's only then that they enroll their child in a public school. The second is we would always work at scale. We knew we had to work through governments and in partnership with state governments, but being in your early 20s and trying to crack government partnerships is not as rosy as it sounds, it can be very challenging. Also, fundraising as a young entrepreneur in the social space and the development sector can be very difficult because of all the social barriers.

In the first few years, some of the largest support we have gotten is capital [investment]. It's the funders who have supported us, and also the people who have trusted us to take this [work] forward, plus our mentors who gave us advice on how to navigate government partnerships and funding relationships.

The second most important support has been unrestricted capital that, for example, Rippleworks provided to us. It's extremely important because when you work at scale, you need flexibility to be able to make decisions on the go. The government is a very dynamic body. Everyone is very high-willed, and it's important to keep up with the pace. Those two things have been extremely catalytic for us in our growth.

Sanne Breimer: What social barriers did you confront as a young [entrepreneur]?

Richa Gupta: Before we worked with governments, we had the perspective that government is this slow-moving, monolithic kind of establishment, but when we started working with governments, we realized that, firstly, the government is made up of people who come from different backgrounds with different incentives, motivations and ways to function. Everyone is mostly well-intentioned, but they don't have the time to be innovative, so even if they have great ideas, they need someone in the backend to help them execute those ideas. That's how we learned how to work with governments.

We decided that instead of being at the forefront of change, can we just enable the government? Can we find champions in the system who really care about children's wellbeing and push them, enable them and do whatever it takes to help them achieve that vision at scale? We thought of ourselves as catalysts in the background supporting the government day-to-day, and that informed our model.

Now when we partner with the government, we place our team members across all levels of the government, from the state to the districts to the zones, so that there is a dynamic person from Labhya who can support the champion counterpart in the government, and make sure that change continues to happen despite all the changing priorities. That's how our understanding of government has evolved over the years.

When we started, all three of us were in our early 20s, and one of our co-founders, Vedant, comes from a proximate reality of childhood adversity. He grew up in a very difficult household and faced various challenges as a child, including violence and trauma. When leaders like Vedant show up in spaces of power, they show up in a different way, different from me, because they understand the hypocrisy of the system. They understand how unfair it has been to them, and yet they feel they need to change it from within.

We struggled with being authentic and very real about where we are coming from as proximate leaders, while balancing the way powerful spaces function, i.e. at a very high level, gracious, with very specific language that everyone uses, both in the funding community and also systemically. We had to learn how to navigate while keeping our own authenticity, while calling out how challenging it can be for a child, how privileged we all are to be sitting here in our air-conditioned rooms, and also to acknowledge that this work is not easy and it’s difficult to navigate.

The second thing we had to navigate was age. In India, when you are growing up, the social dynamic is very different for a young person. Vedant grew facial hair to look older. I would wear fake spectacles. Malika, my co-founder, would wear a sari to look older and more mature. We would try all kinds of tactics to seem more important or serious in the way we spoke and delivered the work. We had to anchor on our work ethic a lot to make sure people trusted us, so we could show them we were worth an investment, or even just their time.

Sanne Breimer: What role does trust play in your relationship with funders?

Richa Gupta: Trust is extremely important in our work at Labhya. In the first few years, we didn't have a lot of social capital. I wasn't an ex-consultant trying something new in her 40s, so definitely, we needed help and we needed people to trust us to do things.

That's something they don't have to think about when investing in someone who's slightly older or more experienced.

Over the years, this definition of trust has also changed because our work has become much more mature. Labhya is now one of the largest children's wellbeing organizations in India. Many of the things we've been doing in the last couple of years are happening for the first time. For example, we're running huge in-school wellbeing programs for the very first time at this scale across the world. In the last two years, we have had a research partner and a government partner. We've conducted the world's largest randomized control trial research on children's wellbeing. The results will be published later this year, but it's going to be a path-breaking moment, not just for Labhya, but also the wellbeing field in general. We've had to shift the trust from me, Vedant, Malika, and our team at Labhya, to people trusting the solution we're working on, and trusting that investing in children's wellbeing is an important enough agenda.

When we think about education, the first thing that comes to mind is children being able to read and do math. Can we also make mental health for children an equal part of that agenda? That cannot happen without trusting philanthropy, and letting us experiment to show what works and what doesn't. That's the journey of trust we've taken, from people trusting us as young innovators, to people now taking a bet on children's wellbeing and outcomes, rather than just us.

Honestly, we have only been able to do this work because of trust-based philanthropy, because in our most crucial years about four or five years ago, we started receiving much more trust-based philanthropy, especially from the United States, and it helped us ramp up our operations and experiment. It's helped us get the right kind of talent to run the organization. Now, thanks to Rippleworks' support, we have a head of people and culture who's an experienced organization development person, and she knows exactly what the pulse of the organization is, now that we're a team of almost 200 people. We've been able to get that talent and bring out the solution much more quickly because of all this philanthropy.

Sanne Breimer: Is trust-based philanthropy a specific type of philanthropy?

Richa Gupta: It's philanthropy that does due diligence on the team and organization it's considering, but also trusts that whatever we're doing in the field is going to reap outcomes. It's not holding us accountable to the day-to-day, it's holding us accountable to the ultimate outcomes we have promised for our children. That has helped us a lot, because it gives us the flexibility to work at scale.

Sanne Breimer: What bold shifts are needed in funding to truly center the voices of those closest to the problem?

Richa Gupta: Number one, can we educate funders and people in powerful positions about leaders who are proximate to a problem and may come across as abrasive, rebellious or sometimes even rude, but they are just acknowledging that where they come from doesn't match this reality, and they see the differences.

The second is, can we be more open to younger entrepreneurs who are trying to do something serious by investing in a large, complex problem. The third thing would be to push organizations to the doers, such as us, to work towards outcomes.

Over the years, we've figured out what works, but over the last couple of years, we've anchored on outcomes, that is, measuring what matters and figuring out key insights that can change lives for children, and work on refining it. That wouldn't have been possible without a good amount of flexibility and pushing from funders to think beyond what we're doing right now. A push towards measuring outcomes can really help, especially in a field like children's mental health where there is very little research and hence very little philanthropy. The more we push for outcomes, the more we measure, the more data that goes out there, the more investments will come in for children's wellbeing.

Sanne Breimer: What can a funder do in a landscape that still makes it difficult for certain types of young funders from different cultural backgrounds?

Richa Gupta: Rippleworks does this very well. In our relationship with Rippleworks, we've seen that, first, the team spends a lot of time understanding us as people and our backgrounds. They listen to our stories to understand why we're doing what we do, and then they dive into our work. The second thing that's gone well with Rippleworks is the projects we've done, which have helped us develop not only a deeper relationship with the team, but also insights on how we work on the day-to-day. We were able to solve a problem together, and then share authentically what's working or not.

One project we did with Rippleworks was creating our brand guidelines. Before that, we were all over the place communication-wise, but that year, we created a whole brand book that reflected our values. The project helped us understand our value system, and how we portray and empower children in communicating about the problem as well. It helped us build a holistic understanding about how we want to do our work, communicate about it, and advocate for it.

Through that process, we created a great brand guide that we now use every day, but more importantly, we built a relationship and a shared understanding of what Labhya stands for. That helped when Rippleworks invested in us and decided to work with us more closely. It helps them advocate for us even more now, because they know where we come from, and how they can help us navigate those spaces.

Sanne Breimer: Would that approach be helpful for other funders to get to know the venture very well and then also advocate for them in other places?

Richa Gupta: Absolutely, yes. Another example is Mulago Foundation, who spent almost a week at Labhya looking at the work we do every day. They went back with a very clear understanding of our strengths and areas of development. Now when they talk about us to others, they not only know our stories, but they know the work we do in the field, and are able to [talk about it] with much more conviction.

Sanne Breimer: You received a talent grant, leaders studio, expert office hours, and project support capacity building from Rippleworks. How does Rippleworks' process of deciding what capacity building support to provide differ from what you've experienced, and how did this impact your work?

Richa Gupta: Last year we did a project with Rippleworks on building our performance management systems and looking at how we build a team. This was catalytic because over the last three years, we've gone from a team of 40 to 150, now almost 200 people, so we have grown quite significantly in our team size, which means the structures, processes, culture, and everything else had to be redone in the most equitable way.

We also hired a lot of diverse talent. Now we have field team members and community workers, as well as highly skilled people sitting in offices. With Rippleworks' support, we're recruiting specific talented experts, like HR or people and culture experts. We thought at the beginning that Rippleworks would just give us a structure on performance management, then we'd fill in the Excel sheet and it would be done. But the mentor pushed back, and helped us understand that our value system has to be reflected in the way we do performance management, and set up processes and structures in the organization. Not everything can be standardized.

There's a reason we're a nonprofit, and we have proximate leaders in our organization, so how can we make sure it's equitable for everybody? We went back and redid the whole process and understood that if our values are integrity, feedback, authenticity and excellence, then how do we reflect that in the performance management system rather than just doing the standard A B, C, 1, 2, 3 rating. How do we also understand who are the high performers? Who are the diamonds in the dust in this growing team that can become leaders? How do we build a system to identify and nurture them? Those were some insights we had not even thought about when we started this process with Rippleworks.

Sanne Breimer: Are there any gaps in this model?

Richa Gupta: Because we're a very high-growth organization, things change on a daily basis, and projects may take many weeks to a few months to formalize and move forward. I don't know if it's an area to improve, but definitely that's something we've had to keep adapting to, because on week one, this was the problem, [but by] week three, we might have other people-related issues. Keeping [the relationship] dynamic going has taken some effort from our end, as things change a lot in our organization month by month. I don't know what the solution could be, but it was something we struggled with.

Sanne Breimer: Do you mean keeping the connection with the mentor within very changeable dynamics, and keeping this person updated?

Richa Gupta: Yes, keeping them updated through all the changing priorities has been a little bit tough. Otherwise, the general output of what we got was extremely valuable.

Sanne Breimer: What do you think funders don't understand about capacity building that will be useful for them to know?

Richa Gupta: Most of our funders are unrestricted funders who understand the work we do, and they are very aligned with us. But as we grow, we also want to diversify who funds us. It's been a little bit challenging to explain that capacity building needs capital to back it up. That could mean a good, talented person coming on the team and matching their salary to the market level, or building the right structures and processes that may be expensive, or using technology in the back end. It's not just a bunch of people deciding to do trainings for the organization. That nuance is something that would be helpful for folks in general to understand a little bit more.

Sanne Breimer: Can tell me more about the your experience with the Talent Grant and Leaders Studio?

Richa Gupta: Both the Talent Grant and the Leaders Studio have been very catalytic for us. First, the Talent Grant helps us exactly with the capacity building needs we have right now, that is, hiring very highly skilled people, and leadership level individuals who understand people and culture. That's helped us refine a lot of our processes. For the first time, because of this grant, we were able to recruit someone [qualified] and do a managers academy.

We brought together all mid-level managers in the organization for a six-month program on their leadership capacity building. It's been extremely helpful to decentralize a lot of the work we're doing and have them own the delivery. The grant is also helping us hire for important roles with the government partnerships. That can help us make sure we have a sustainable way of building relationships with governments and also to scale further.

At this point, a lot of the leadership at Labhya is older than us. The Leaders Studio helped my co-founder, Malika, understand how to navigate the mindset of leaders in general, how to regulate ourselves in challenging situations, and how to manage a team which is high-skilled and dynamic and yet grounded in the ownership towards Labhya. A lot of our senior leaders have joined Leaders Studio sessions, some of the longer ones as well as some one-off sessions on people management, goal setting, and things to help them hone their own skills.

Sanne Breimer: You have young founders and then you hired people with much more experience. The Leaders Studio played a big role in helping you with that. What would you change to make the Leaders Studio more useful?

Richa Gupta: Maybe this is not possible since Rippleworks funds across various geographies, but perhaps having some experts from the Indian context would be helpful with, for example, our labor laws, our employment laws, even some technical things we navigate. For example, in India, it's very difficult to give bonuses even when people are doing great, because showing a big jump in salary is not considered good accounting.

How can we reward people but still adhere to the laws, and still be a sustainable organization? Small nuances like those would be helpful, by having someone with [local] context to guide us. Various smaller nuances could also help. Culturally, the way we function in the US versus India is a bit different. We as leadership have learned to adapt, and we've developed a lot of cultural sensitivity because of the work we do, but how can we nurture the same level of ownership, the same expertise, in a culturally different way?

Sanne Breimer: Since Rippleworks works across different geographies, what could they do to solve this problem right away? What would be a first step?

Richa Gupta: Rippleworks already might have a group of mentors they pull in for a project. Maybe they could vet and keep a pool of HR experts, or people experts in general, with an Indian context, so they could double up as facilitators for us. That might be very helpful in the short term.

Sanne Breimer: Which continents did the mentors and experts you've worked with so far come from?

Richa Gupta: The first communications mentor was from the United States, but that was okay because we also speak to American philanthropy the most. For the second time, we had two mentors. One was from America, and the other was of Indian origin but hadn't worked in India as much. That's where we saw a little bit of a gap, especially

because the second project was on HR and culture, so a lot of it had to do with how to work within the constraints of our own demographics.

Sanne Breimer: Where do you get most of your funding?

Richa Gupta: Mostly our funding comes from foreign philanthropy. 70% to 80% comes from the US, with some from the UK, and a very minimal amount from India right now.

Sanne Breimer: The wellbeing classes you implement are mandatory in the Indian school system. Has the Indian government put some money in that as well?

Richa Gupta: Our partnership with the government is non-financial. Basically we don't take any money from the government, nor do we give them any money, but the government does commit to funding the program. What does that mean? All the books printed and distributed for the curriculum are funded by the government. All the trainings that happen every quarter for almost 150,000 teachers are funded by the government. All programmatic expenses and allowances are funded by the government, and so is the time given by government officials.

In a way, we are free, providing our expertise and our people to the system to catalyze the work. That's the model. In India, the philanthropic space is moving quite slowly when it comes to children's wellbeing, partly because there wasn't a lot of evidence around this work, which hopefully we are solving for this year. Secondly, mental health is generally still a big taboo, and not just in India. Talking about or funding mental health might be less socially desirable philanthropically. We're navigating those barriers domestically, but because of the way we've scaled our operations work, we need large-scale philanthropy, and that mostly comes from American philanthropy.

Sanne Breimer: A few state governments support you at the moment. Which region in India is mostly covered right now?

Richa Gupta: We mostly work in the north and northeast side of India, but there's lots more to cover, since India is a continent on its own.

Sanne Breimer: What advice would you give to funders who want to help social ventures become more successful?

Richa Gupta: My advice would be to deeply listen to the founders, their stories and the 'why' behind the work they do, to be very curious about outcomes and how seriously they are measured, and the third is to bet on the team to trust them to do the work.

Sanne Breimer: What is the biggest challenge in the support you've received?

Richa Gupta: [Getting] trusted that we are a good team to solve the problem, and that we are committed to solving the problem at scale. I don't think we've experienced a gap [in this regard], but a better push [on this] would be helpful.

Sanne Breimer: What are the top three things you need to unlock your ability to scale and sustain?

Richa Gupta: The first is irrefutable evidence proving that when children are regulated, they learn better. That's what we're working on with the RCT [randomized control trial]. The second is scaling more through state governments, with more steady state government partnerships and more investments from the government into the programming [that promotes] a narrative that children's wellbeing helps. The third is catalytic philanthropy that supports the scale we want to achieve. Our goal is to impact 30 million children by 2030. This year we will reach approximately 9 million children, so we are almost one-third there, but we have less time, so we need all these three to come together to reach this.

Sanne Breimer: It's been a pleasure to speak to you, thank you very much.

Richa Gupta: Thank you so much for taking the time and for such thoughtful questions.

Sanne Breimer (she/her) is a freelance journalism trainer, project manager and adviser for international media organizations including SembraMedia, Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), European Journalism Centre, Thibi, and the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU). She founded Inclusive Journalism, aiming to educate (primarily) Western journalists about media representation and decolonisation through a weekly newsletter, online courses and retreats. Sanne works remotely and divides her time between Europe and South East Asia. Before moving into training, Sanne worked at a managerial level in national public broadcasting in the Netherlands for almost 13 years, focusing on radio, digital media and innovation. She is Dutch with Frisian roots.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*