

Book Review – Jerry Marshall

My Silk Road

The Adventures & Struggles of a British Asian Refugee

By Ram Gidoomal

Pippa Rann, 2022, 270 pp, hardback, £25, ISBN 978-1-913738-60-0

When I interviewed Ram Gidoomal for Faith in Business Monthly I realised we hardly scratched the surface. *My Silk Road* is an extraordinary autobiography and a gripping read with lessons for life and helpful insights into using business for Kingdom purposes.

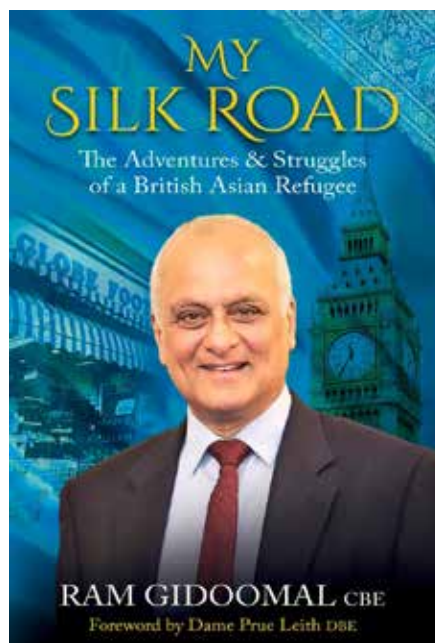
Part of the fascination was my sense of connection: a shared cross-cultural childhood and connections with some of the people and places Ram mentions. But all of us involved in Faith in Business and the ICF can relate to a story of someone using business for good.

The story is of an almost idyllic childhood in Mombasa, Kenya, as part of a prosperous extended Sindhi family, silk traders who made good after losing everything fleeing the partition of India in 1947. Then, like so many South Asians in East Africa, Ram's father was given 24 hours to leave the country. Aged 17, Ram arrived at Heathrow, not knowing if he would be allowed to remain.

His business teeth were cut managing a corner shop. Despite experiencing racism, the business succeeded and expanded as the Gidoomal family recognised the needs of different groups of customers. He also worked with relatives on informal loans and international money transfers within the Sindhi community. Breaking cultural expectations, he was able to marry the woman he loved, in part because he was beginning to do well in business.

Two key turning points were finding Jesus (in a pub!) and later a traumatic visit to a slum in Mumbai. The person who invited him separately invited Steve Chalke, founder of Oasis, and introduced them to each other. The immediate result was the Christmas Cracker initiative, which ran for seven years in

the 1990s, mobilising 50,000 teenagers and raising millions of pounds. Much of the rest of the book – a high range of extraordinary initiatives – can be traced back to this life-changing experience and God-given connections.



I have some reservations. As with most autobiographies (including my own), this is a record of the positives. It is difficult to achieve a great deal without rubbing a few people up the wrong way so no doubt there are other sides to the story.

I was curious about Ram's determination to be on multiple public sector boards: was this a need for recognition after his dramatic fall in status and experience of racism when he became a teenage immigrant?

Ram clearly sees the value of cross-cultural integration¹. The British establishment's bias towards the 'right sort of chap' rightly comes in for criticism but I suspect that South Asian

(and many other) organisations are also biased towards their own communities.

Nevertheless, there are many fascinating insights.

- Community living: Asian extended families, sharing life together and meeting others' needs; this is how the church should be.
- Mutual support also extends to business: whatever happened to "My word is my bond"? Years ago, I learned from a Christian bank manager that the Hindu business community always supported others – including competitors – in financial difficulty without hesitation or formal contracts.
- Racism encourages immigrants to "keep their head down" which impedes integration.
- Myopic business: Ram found it difficult to get his first career role despite being well qualified; and when he did secure a role with a well-known international bank and (in due course) offered his vast array of international businesses relationships across South East Asia and Africa, he was met with reluctance and refusal.
- Church culture alien to many: Ram's concern when first entering a church was that he couldn't find where we Christians put our shoes. There are so many things we don't even think about that make it tough for those outside a church culture to feel welcome and comfortable.
- Myopic public sector boards: his experience was that these are shockingly limited to the 'right' people or those with the right

Ram Gidoomal at the project to mark 50 years since Ugandan Asian refugees arrived in Britain 1972–2022.

Photo: X



connections; it took a long time for him to break through the barriers. Even then, some appointments were vetoed by ministers worried that Ram was politically dangerous! This isn't just about race: as a successful young entrepreneur keen to use my experience to help others set up business, I myself sent ideas and an application to join the Local Enterprise Partnership board but didn't even get a reply.

- Scottish workers were delighted to discover their new CEO was Indian not English!

There are also valuable lessons for life.


- The impact of small kindnesses: one prestigious board appointment came out of re-connecting with a school friend who remembered, decades later, how he always shared his tuck money at school and therefore could be trusted. Again and again, small kindnesses produced an unexpected big return. In a similar way, speaking

up for truth, however difficult at the time, brings a return.

- Don't despise small beginnings: Ram first appointment was on an obscure board but he discovered that many different strands of his life had prepared him well and that he could make a mark which led on to many other roles.
- The power of relational networking: my wife once said networking was my super power! Ram's life-changing visit to a Mumbai slum and meeting with Steve Chalke shows how connectors – often in the background – can change the world. This is especially true when different spheres, communities or perspectives are brought together. I loved the idea of a 'Christian Diwali' festival of light celebrating Jesus, the light of the world, to bring communities together.
- The power of persistent prayer: a woman in Switzerland, a family

trading friend, starting praying for the whole family in the late 1950s and didn't stop. Decades later she met Ram and she discovered how God had answered her faithful prayers.

One organisation that my charity Transformational Enterprise Network works with has created more than 280,000 micro-businesses. It's a direct result of a word from God from the feeding of the 5000: don't worry, as the disciples did, about what you don't have; start with the little you do have. What are your 'loaves and fishes' that God can multiply? Perhaps the most important life lesson of all is Ram's lifetime maxim, which is almost the same: "Never let what you can't do stop you from doing what you can". It's a message for all of us.

Following God's path led Ram to "riches of greater worth than I could have imagined". His journey is a fascinating, well-written account which will leave you pondering his reflections for a long time. 

1. The vital need for 'cognitive diversity' to increase corporate intelligence is powerfully argued in Matthew Syed's book *Rebel Ideas* (John Murray, 2021).



Jerry Marshall is a Christian entrepreneur, speaker and author based in Cheshire. He's founder director of Transcend, an impact business in Bethlehem set up to create jobs, 'transcend' barriers and bring hope. In 2020 he founded Transformational Enterprise Network, a community of Christian business people using their skills and resources to tackle poverty www.tencommunity.net. Married to Sue with three daughters and four grandchildren, he loves boats and recently learned to play the accordion.