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Self - actualization in the world of Kamala Das and Indra Nooyi

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Abstract

This study explores the journey of self-actualization in the lives of two iconic women, Kamala Das and Indra Nooyi, from different walks of life—literature and business—by analyzing their pursuit of happiness, personal growth, and fulfillment. Both women, rooted in traditional cultural and familial values, defied societal constraints to achieve their highest potential. Kamala Das, through her literary voice, overcame personal hardships and psychological barriers to claim her space as a poetess, while Indra Nooyi navigated the male-dominated corporate world, rising to the pinnacle of global business leadership. Drawing on Maslow's theory of self-actualization, the paper discusses how these women reflect key aspects of eudaimonic happiness—autonomy, self-expression, purpose, and personal growth. Their shared resilience and determination highlight the universal quest for self-realization, making them exemplary figures in the pursuit of self-fulfillment, despite their divergent paths.

Keywords: Self-actualization, Kamala Das, Indra Nooyi, happiness, eudaimonic well-being, Maslow's hierarchy, personal growth

Introduction

Writing was my only hobby." (My Story 132)

Admittedly, writing was more than a passion or a hobby, but a lifeline for the great Indian poetess Kamala Das. She came alive through her free style writing, a stream of words kindling the prolificacy of thoughts in the contemporary world, nudging it out of complacency. That was her purpose, and it became her perpetual source of happiness.

Happiness, a state of well-being and contentment, is central to every human life. Happiness is a polygonal, manifold experience that manifests in a person's emotional and cognitive levels through feelings of joy, contentment and satisfaction. This complex state is however a very personal and subjective experience and can vary from person to person. For some, achieving goals through a focused, purposeful life is a metric of happiness while for some others meaningful relationships and joyful activities lead them to the exhilarating high summit. The former group is referred to as eudaimonic while the latter segment is hedonic. A world devoid of pain and discomfort is the realm of hedonism. On the other hand, a dominion to learn, grow, perform and attain self-contentment is eudaimonism. For eudaemonists, the pinnacle of happiness is self - contentment and that is the direct offshoot of the philosophy of self-actualization. In other words, the search for happiness and contentment is aligned with the pursuit of self-actualization.

Since time immemorial, we have come across many theories to explain the psychology of happiness. Aristotle, the much revered and respected Greek philosopher is deemed as the founder of happiness. 'It was Aristotle, in the fourth century B.C.E., who first put the matter most forcefully. Happiness, he expounded at length in the Nichomachean Ethics, is an "activity of the soul that expresses virtue." For Aristotle, all things in the universe have a purpose, a function, an end (telos). And that end, he says, is what gives expression to the highest nature and calling of the thing.' (The History of Happiness 400 BC - A.D 1780 6)

Out of the innumerable theories promulgated over the many decades, a few of them gained predominance over the rest, as humankind at large, could relate and connect to them, more realistically. The 'Set Point Theory', advocated by psychologists Lykken and Tellegen in 1996 states that there is a reference point for happiness which is determined by genetics and personality traits. However, 'Flow Theory', proposed by American - Hungarian psychologist

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Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, refers to happiness as the state of being fully immersed and engaged in an activity. 'Social Comparison Theory' by Leon Festinger, a social psychologist, says that individuals determine their own social and personal worth by comparison with others in the same society whereas 'Self-Determination Theory' developed by Deci and Ryan, posits that happiness stems from the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs, namely, autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are satisfied, individuals experience greater well-being. In the same line is 'Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory' put forth by Frederick Herzberg in the 1950s that distinguishes factors which cause satisfaction and dissatisfaction. He suggests that motivators are factors that motivate people to do more and gain happiness and hygiene factors, otherwise called dissatisfiers, are those factors, if inadequate, can lead to dissatisfaction and disillusionment. Mark Fabian, Associate Professor at the University of Warwick, spoke about 'Subjective Well-Being', a concept that elaborates happiness as realization of one's own aspirations and desires, which is an extension of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs where self-contentment and happiness comes from self-actualization, a realm of peace that can be achieved only once the more basic physiological and psychological needs are met. When we analyze and integrate the myriad insights and theories about happiness, it becomes clear like writing on the wall that factors which influence happiness and self-contentment are intrinsic or structural, influenced by personal goals, growth and ambitions, positive relationships and environmental conditions, an interplay of hedonism or eudaemonism. "I am at peace." (My Story 213), an affirmative statement from Kamala Das is a reiteration of the fact that she had transcended to this idealistic world, a vista of serenity, visualized by Abraham Maslow.

Self-actualization - Relevance in A Woman's World

Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist, put forth his theory of hierarchy of needs that significantly changed the understanding of human psyche and those elements that influence human behavior, thoughts and deeds. Maslow's theory emphasized that self-actualization is the pinnacle of one's being, and it can only be achieved once more basic needs, like physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem, are realized. To reach this summit is not an easy task. In fact, only 1% of humankind experiences self-actualization as it requires a deep understanding of own self and a commitment to personal growth and fulfillment. This journey to self-actualization is a gradual process that takes life through winding routes segmented as five different levels, as per to Maslow's hierarchical pyramid of human needs:

- **Physiological needs:** Basic requirements for survival such as food, water, and shelter.
- **Safety needs:** Security and protection from destruction and harm.
- **Sense of belonging:** Social connections, relationships, and a sense of belonging.
- **Self-esteem:** Respect, recognition, and self-worth.
- **Self-actualization:** The sense of self-fulfillment and content upon realizing fullest potential in terms of personal growth and social contributions

"Human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of prepotency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need. Man is a perpetually wanting animal. Also, no need or drive can be treated as if it were isolated or discrete; every drive is related to the state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other drives".

(Theory of Human Motivation 5)

Deriving from Aristotelian philosophy, Maslow states that self-actualization is the highest level of human development and achievement, the result of pursuing meaningful goals, doing what is intended of our life and reaching the end purpose of existence. He describes this as a eudaemonic pinnacle of self-fulfillment which brings intense joy and elevates the person to an idealistic realm of self-actualization. "Even if all these needs are satisfied, we may still often (if not always) expect that a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, must be. This need we may call self-actualization".

(Theory of Human Motivation 15)

The concept of self-actualization is applicable to both men and women alike. No matter the gender, there is an innate desire in every heart to become the best version of own self. In the given times, it shall be noted that the extent to which a woman realizes this peak experience is largely dependent on societal, cultural, and gender-specific factors that limit the growth of women.

Women are often glorified as dignified 'home makers' and dressed in the fine robes of a care giver, nurturing her family as well as extended family, regardless of the fact that she is forced to relinquish her dreams and personal goals for the betterment of the family.

In a woman's world, the possibility of self-actualization remains an unrealistic mirage unless we break the unwritten norms of gender discrimination, bring down the glass ceiling and promote women empowerment through education, awareness and support. We should strive for an egalitarian society that advocates gender equality, equal opportunities, creating an inclusive environment where women can flourish and pursue self-actualization.

In history, a rare gem like Kamala Das was able to break free from the stifling effects of social expectations to make a niche for herself in the Indian as well as global literary world, in the early 20th century. In the same vein, Indra Nooyi was successful in balancing career aspirations with other life roles such as parenting and caregiving and left her footprints behind for the younger generations to follow. Breaking the inhibiting conventional norms, these women made their indelible mark in Indian history as women who pursued their calling of life and achieved ultimate happiness and contentment through self-actualization.

Roadway To Self - actualization In The Life of Kamala Das

Kamala Das, one of the most celebrated Indian poets in English, won a place in the hearts of the literary lovers, through her candid and forthright writing, challenging the conventional notions by depicting sensual desires of the

body without the camouflage of literary embellishments. Through her writing she explored the existence of love, engulfed in the consuming flames of desire, searched for her own identity, and laid threadbare the challenges of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Her autobiography 'My Story' revolves around her restrictive childhood, raging racism prevalent in those days, her bittersweet memories of the ancestral home 'Nalapat', loveless life of her parents and the tumultuous days of her early marriage. The sense of loneliness stayed with her throughout her life, until she learned to deal with it. Although her aristocratic family was dwindling and declining in terms of ancestral property and wealth, her father was a renowned executive in an automobile company that fetched a hefty amount as monthly remuneration which ensured that Kamala's primary needs were all realized. Yet, her experiences of discrimination at school, the solitude of the big, cold house sans the warmth of expressive love marred her psyche that she struggled to find her identity and self-worth.

"So we grew up more or less neglected, and because we were aware of ourselves as neglected children in a social circle that pampered the young, there developed between us a strong relationship of love." (My Story 2)

In the first chapter of her autobiography, she goes on to narrate how her brother was beaten up in school by the white boys, yelling 'Blackie, your blood is red' on account of his brown skin and how she fought back in mad rage albeit overpowered and defeated at the end. School days remain as a painful chapter in her book and her anguish is written in so many words: "When the visitors came the brown children were always discreetly hidden away, swept under the carpet, told to wait in the corridor behind the lavatories where the school ayahs kept them company". (My Story 3).

The sense of belonging and acceptance was an elusive dream that she was continuously chasing in her life. As much as she yearned for it, she fell into the abyss of trauma and disappointment when she could not find it in her growing up days. As any young child would do, she turned to her parents for love and recognition. But her mom was in a secluded world, devoid of any warmth and her dad played the part of a patriarchal father with minimal or no interaction with the children. Her mother, without a word of protest, adjusted to the Gandhian way of life, imposed on her by her husband. But in turn, she became vague and indifferent, spending all her time lying on her belly, on a large four poster bed.

"My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismatched. But my mother's timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends". (My Story 4)

The extent of disillusionment in young Kamala's life is explicitly expressed in her own words, "I was six and very sentimental. I wrote sad poems about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity". (My Story 8) Entangled in the maze of feudal system, where any discussion about sex was taboo by Nair principles, Kamala never discussed sex and she had no clue as to what happens between a man and a woman in the name of procreation. And thus, married as young as fifteen years of age to a man who was much senior to her by many years, her partner's sexual haste on the wedding night gave her a rude shock. She yearned for love and understanding but when she asked for it, each time her husband took her behind a closed door

to love her in a way that humiliated and disgraced her. "I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be, and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms the loneliness of my life". (My Story 80). Yet she overcame the agonies and turbulences of married life, rose above the ashes, for she was emotionally strong and resilient.

Emotional Intelligence, also termed as emotional quotient is the ability to understand and manage own emotions in a positive manner and is manifested through five key metrics which are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. For Kamala Das, her life was an emotional rollercoaster ride. Living in the heat and hustle - bustle of Mumbai, she turned to self-introspection to decipher her existence in more meaningful ways. Her sense of self-awareness and self-regulation is remarkably well expressed in her works. Poetry was her calling and she wrote vigorously with an aching heart, about her desolation, identity crisis and quest for love. She connected deeply with the lives of the middle-class women, empathized with them and gave them life through her evocative poetry capturing the raw emotions of womanhood. The love for writing was in her veins and she wrote effortlessly, pouring her heart into her works. She wanted to be heard through her works, expressing her emotional dissonance in finely worded works of art. She broke free from the bondage of ancestral, conventional values and soon rose to the ranking of an established poetess in English. Her works were noticed, for her painful cry in her blatant portrayal of every woman's life. Writing was catharsis for her and the plain sincerity of her narration was a natural flair in her. It helped her to control the turmoil of emotions inside and transcend over the worldly challenges to mould herself better. Her ability to endure mental pain, manage the inner conflicts and channel creatively shows a high level of emotional intelligence which was a stabilizing factor in her life.

Her skill of self-expression through poetry and other fine literary works uninhibitedly, delving deep into the constraints of societal norms and bondage of relationships, made an impact and was instrumental in bringing about a wave of change in the patriarchal minds and conservative societies.

Through her provocative writing, breaking the norms, harping on taboo subjects which sparked many controversies, she changed the stereotype image of woman as a silent home maker to a bold and beautiful one, worthy to share the limelight with men writers of her times.

Legacy of Kamala Das: Kamala Das has received many awards for her literary contribution, including the PEN Asian Poetry Prize in 1963, Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1968, and Kendra Sahitya Academy Award (English) in 1985. In the year 1984 she was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature for her book, 'My Story', which was the translated version of her autobiography *Ente Katha* (1973), originally written in Malayalam. In the end, she stamped her identity in the literary world - a legacy respected and revered till date. Her life and work remain a testament to self-actualization through revolutionary poetic expression, unparalleled art and unblemished search for own identity.

2.2 The Journey of Indra Nooyi to Self-actualization

Indra Nooyi is an Indian-born American business executive who was the chairman and CEO of PepsiCo from 2006 to 2018. She has consistently ranked among the world's 100 most powerful women. Today, she is on the boards of PepsiCo, Amazon and the International Cricket Council.

The pursuit of self-actualization and its realization lies in her personal journey towards achieving her full potential, both professionally and personally. Beyond professional acclaim and a well-balanced personal life, she was able to impact the world at large, especially her fellow women friends and colleagues who were pursuing their own paths to self-actualization, up the twisted and challenging corporate ladders.

Her early life and meaningful lessons had a long-lasting and telling effect on how she shaped her life and handled the many curves that life threw at her. Hailing from a Tamil family, deep-rooted in the religious Brahmin values, she recalls her childhood in 'Lakshmi Nilayam' which had two living rooms - one for the women of the house and the other for the men. While the men's living room was a practical space, a vast hall with big square windows from where it was easy to keep an eye on who came in and went out, the women's living room, with a huge rosewood swing was the stage for a million stories shared between Indra's mother, her sisters and cousins. They planned meals, discussed children's grades and deliberated on the horoscopes, in an effort to find suitable matches for the young in the family. Her grandfather, a retired district judge, whom she calls as 'thatha' remained a dominating presence in her formative years. He spent all his time in the men's living room, reading through the day, lounging in an easy chair. He warmly welcomed visitors and effortlessly conversed with them about world matters, local politics and current affairs. Despite the forward-thinking family values, yet "I never saw a woman sit in that room in front of our grandfather. My mother was always in and out of the room, serving coffee and snacks to visitors or tidying up" (My Life in Full, Work, Family and Our Future 5).

Indra draws a clear distinction between the lives of men and women in Lakshmi Nilayam, when she writes about her grandmother who gave birth to eight children, but she never saw her speak to her grandfather nor does she recall them sharing the same space. Instead, they used to live in different parts of the house. At a very young age, her mind decoded the simple fact of the patriarchal world that she was never meant to cross over to the man's world. For her, the heart and soul of her existence was in the open hall with red tiled floor and the gigantic rosewood swing from where her mother orchestrated household affairs. Her life's mastery and ability to adapt and adjust were the results of her practical upbringing, the way she was raised by her mother and father. Her father, an established banker, rendered a helping hand in household chores whenever he was around and was a peace lover who respected his better half and trusted her with his monthly paycheck, to run the everyday expenses. Indra respects her father for inculcating the value of financial independence and self-reliance in her young mind. "We are investing in your education to help you stand on your own two feet. The rest is up to you. Be your own person." (My Life in Full, Work, Family and Our Future 10) Indra was well provided, growing up in the comforts of her family home, under the guidance of world-wise 'thatha' and caring, nurturing parents who instilled in her the importance

of education and self-reliance. It was okay to be equally ambitious as the boys. Being a woman was never a disadvantage when it came to intellectual growth and securing opportunities. "I got the courage to branch out and prove myself because I was raised within a framework that gradually gave me the freedom to explore. There was always home to anchor me." (My Life in Full, Work, Family and Our Future 9).

Fueled by ambition and desire to lead a purposeful life, she studied passionately and worked hard to rise-up the hierarchical levels of the corporate. "I was female, an immigrant, and a person of colour entering an executive floor where I was different from everyone else". (My Life in Full, Work, Family and Our Future x). In retrospection, she feels she belong to both worlds - deeply connected with the Madras family roots where her life's journey began and, in the US, the country that received her at a tender age of twenty-three, opening a new empire of opportunities for growth. She struggled to belong, to connect with the new world but eventually, she rose in self-esteem when she successfully stamped her identity in the corporate world. "We are all balancing, juggling, compromising, doing our best to find our place, move ahead, and manage our relationships and responsibilities. It's not easy in a society that changes very fast yet sticks to some age-old habits and rules of behavior that feel out of control." (My Life in Full, Work, Family and Our Future x).

Indra's personal values, such as integrity and resilience were the foundation of her ethical leadership. This truthfulness and sound principles of life helped her in her walk to self-actualization. The landscape of self-actualization was an achievable dream because of her sound thinking and analytical abilities, and her high level of intelligence.

Intelligence quotient, a measure of reasoning and cognitive ability, was the steppingstone in Indra's climb up the corporate echelons. Despite being an American of Indian origin and on top of that, a woman from a very aristocratic family, yet Nooyi's professional approach and her strategic thoughts helped her to influence the business world and make a global impact. Her ability to traverse through the complex business landscape, leading one of the largest multinational companies for over a decade, shows how IQ has played an integral part in her success. She introduced the concept 'performance with purpose' which scaled PepsiCo to greater heights of financial acclaim. To help the young women of PepsiCo who often contemplated on taking a career break while stepping into new norms of motherhood, she began a crush for baby care, by converting a full-fledged office in the same building of the main office of PepsiCo, which helped the young mothers to manage their new responsibilities together with their career, without calling it quits. She valued the opinion of consumers and often made radical changes in the products' mix, packaging and positioning to meet the customer needs, understanding the shifting trends. She made efforts to connect with the family of her employees for she knew that they play a larger role in her employees' day to day performance at work, which directly affected the company's performance and growth. Throughout her career, Nooyi embraced change and emphasized the importance of learning from challenges, thus staying abreast in a dynamic business environment.

Legacy of Indra Nooyi: Indra Nooyi's life marked by innumerable achievements, her firmly rooted high values in

life as well as her unquenchable aspirations to rise above the gender and ethnic barriers is a lesson for all the young businesswomen. Her inclusive thoughts and actions which revolved around and beyond the office and home, helped her make a societal impact. Indra Nooyi's simple lesson for the corporates, known as the '5 Cs', namely competency, confidence, courage, communication, consistency along with a strong ethical and moral compass lays down a practical and doable framework for effective leadership which is practiced until this day. Her experiences and ideologies continue to impact the business world as well as the broader community and society. In recognition of her contribution, Indra K. Nooyi was honoured with the Padma Bhushan award by the Government of India in 2009. She was conferred the Barnard Medal of Honor, the highest award given by Barnard College, New York. The American global business magazine, 'Fortune' named Nooyi number one on its annual ranking of 'Most Powerful Women in Business' in the years from 2006 to 2010, consistently. She was named one of the "Best CEOs in The World" by the CEO WORLD magazine in 2018. In 2021, Nooyi was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame, an American institution to recognize and honour women. Her journey continues, contributing to the larger society and impacting the world around her.

Thread of Commonality and Contrast in The Lives of Kamala Das And Indra Nooyi

Both Kamala Das and Indra Nooyi, the chosen protagonists for the purpose of this study have walked up the five tier ladder of needs. They belong to devout Hindu, middle class families of rich heritage and cultural values. They grew up listening to the philosophy of Vedas and divine chants of tantrism. Yet their journey to self-actualization was unique with unparalleled twists and bends.

Kamala Das led a cocooned and sheltered life until tier 2, where all her physiological and security needs were met in full. But she was deprived of familial love and the opportunity of higher studies and instead was married off at a tender age of fifteen. Her struggle starts with her marriage that wrecked her psyche and affected her mental health. She yearned to create her own identity while coping with motherhood challenges and yet striving to design a niche for herself in the literary world. Her relentless strife to regain her self-worth and self-esteem, to experience the sense of belonging became the repetitive theme in her literary works. She fought her way up, through tier 3 and beyond, with her emotional intelligence guiding her, to win laurels and accolades for her literary works, and eventually carved for herself a prestigious space in the world of letters and a pedestal of self-esteem in her mind. That is when she stepped up to the last tier of self - actualization, fulfilling her literary dreams as a known and acclaimed writer.

For Indra Nooyi, her combat for self-esteem and acceptance as a senior business executive began at tier 4 which she mastered successfully through her incredible intelligence quotient and credible business thoughts and professional speech with strategic intent that she became a sought-after management guru, offering valuable lessons through Yale School of Management and talk shows in Harvard Business School. Her steadfast anchor was her family, her parents and siblings, her in-laws and extended family of uncles and aunts who were there, ever ready to pitch in whenever a need arises. Her strongest pillar of support and rest is her husband, Raj. She found her soulmate in him, and they share a cherished space of love, trust and understanding. There

were times when she felt she was far less a mother as she was unable to attend to her children's whims and fancies as any other mother would. But, her family, mainly her mother and her husband, helped her to overcome these weak moments by stepping up to fill the void of her absence in children's life. Her life was a far more balanced one, well stitched together with the fine threads of deep bonds and positive relationships. And this was her strength, like the wind beneath the wings that propelled her higher and higher to scale the heights of business success.

Conclusion

Through a thorough walk into the secretive as well as open chambers of the lives of Kamala Das and Indra Nooyi, although they hail from different walks of life, it is well-established that these women exhibited certain common behavioural traits which is a manifestation of their self - actualization in life.

Autonomy: Both Kamala Das and Indra Nooyi had a strong sense of independence and were able to make decisions based on personal values and beliefs.

Realistic and Responsible: They were true to own self and not swayed by societal expectations or pressures while responsibly acting in all situations of life.

Open and Spontaneous: Both the women had a penchant for candid self-expression, sometimes mincing their words but most of the times expressing innermost feelings in its original manner that shook the conventional world and breached the traditional thoughts.

Solitary: Kamala Das wrote voraciously when in moments of solitude, and Indra Nooyi came up with interesting strategies and concepts in her tranquil moments. They are self-assured women who reveled in own company and own space. They found happiness in solitude.

Purpose: They both found a clear meaning in their existence. They pursued life with precision, every step taken in the right direction, driven by personal values and goals. For them, the journey in itself, despite the heartaches and pitfalls, is more thrilling and enjoyable than the destination.

Happiness: Having achieved their calling in life, the highest level of personal growth and potential, both Kamala Das and Indra Nooyi are women who lived in the richness of eudaemonism and relished the serenity in the realm of self-actualization.

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