



**American Ajja**  
**Interview with Shankar Hegde**

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KENNEALLY: *American Ajja* is a memoir that takes readers on the journey of a lifetime, from the tiny village of Kotagudde in rural Karnataka State, India, to university in Bangalore and then to the American heartland.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

A chemist turned technology executive, Shankar Hegde built a successful career in the software industry beginning in the late 1970s, and today, he mentors entrepreneurs on how-to aspects of entrepreneurship. He has published scholarly research papers and holds a patent. He received his PhD from Purdue University and executive management training from MIT Sloan School of Management. Shankar Hegde, welcome to Beyond the Book.

HEGDE: Thank you, Chris. It's really delightful to join you in the conversation.

KENNEALLY: We look forward to chatting with you today, because we've been looking at your memoir, *American Ajja*. It's a book that takes you and readers from the tiny village of Kotagudde in rural Karnataka State, as we said, to university studies in the big city of Bangalore and then to the United States and Purdue University there in the American heartland. From there, of course, it amounted to a springboard for a successful business career. And I really want to ask you, Shankar, about some of the challenges you faced. What would you describe as your greatest challenge through all these various transitions in your life?

HEGDE: Chris, let me start off by giving some background. *Ajja* means grandpa in Kannada, the official language of the state of Karnataka in India, where I grew up. Now, I am an *ajja*, with stories to tell my grandkids born and brought up here in the United States. Often, as you know, information gets lost that is passed down only orally from one generation to the next. So it is from my standing as *ajja* that I took an interest in writing this book to preserve my experiences for my children, grandchildren, and future generations.



As you know – you probably read a little bit – this book should appeal to all Americans, and especially to immigrants who are trying to make America their home. They'll enjoy the story of how a kid brought up in a remote village in India got admission to the PhD program at Purdue, landed in America with only two quarters in his pocket, and went on to build a successful life with innovation and hard work.

Each chapter is self-contained. You can read chapters in any order. Did you have an arranged marriage is a frequent question I get from my colleagues, so there is a chapter on that. Coming to America should be an interesting read for all. There is a chapter on cultural aspects of rural India, as well.

Chris, I'm not going to bore you with all the details, but as far as your question, I cannot think of just one greatest challenge, but several different types of challenges throughout my life. For example, getting admission to Purdue – I didn't have any knowledge or knew people who could guide me through various processes. It was all hard work and learning on the way. Again, when I changed from chemistry to computing and then from computing to consulting, it was hard work and learning on the job. The lesson I learned from these challenges is that no matter what life throws at you, get up and go. Resilience and perseverance have been hallmarks of my life, Chris.

**KENNEALLY:** As you say, get up and go is your sort of mantra, if I can use the term, and it is one that you have had to do throughout your life and in your career. You've witnessed great changes in technology and in business, and you've helped direct the responses to those changes by many organizations in such fields as digital learning, medical devices, financial services, and even in publishing rights and licensing work that you do for Copyright Clearance Center. So today in 2018, having a career spanning several decades, what are the areas of technology and business that most interest you?

**HEGDE:** Yes, throughout my career, I have applied many technologies – rather appropriate technologies and processes to solve a business issue or add value to a corporation. I just don't do technology for technology's sake.

Having said that, in today's information age, data is everywhere. And as you know, it is big data. When I mean big data, what I mean is huge amounts of data, and they are going into terabytes and petabytes and you name it – zillions of zillions of data, a combination of structured and unstructured data. Structured, obviously, in the database, and unstructured is coming from all kinds of different



sources – Twitter, Facebook, you name it. So, the challenges and opportunities lie in uncovering hidden patterns, unknown correlations, market trends, and customer preferences that can help organizations to make better and smarter business decisions.

KENNEALLY: You see some opportunities there, obviously. Expand on that a bit – the opportunities in data and the direction that you see this taking us over the next several years.

HEGDE: Yeah, opportunities in data are humongous, right? Look at how many companies have started just leveraging data from Facebook. So really the right type of data – the right content, rather – is so critical and important, especially in this age of many fake news. So critically, the accessibility of data – so once you have the right data and you can start your company, or sometimes there are clearly different markets, as well.

There's some examples – I'm not going to, again, give you a lot of details, but sometimes if you don't access or get the data in the right way, it would really create trouble for you. Recently, Cambridge Analytica had big trouble, as you know, because they obviously didn't get the data in the right way.

KENNEALLY: Right. Certainly, one of the changes that you witnessed, going back to your days as a schoolboy, you lived in a world – I suppose we'd call it the analog world, a world of books and paper and pens. Today, of course, it's very much a digital world. With that, we've seen a decline in reading and a movement towards more visual and musical, lyrical types of entertainment and even information, and as well a decrease in ownership. What does all of that mean to you? How do you respond to that, being someone who grew up with the paper and pen and the book?

HEGDE: That's a good example. I obviously grew up on paper like most people. But you have to get with the change, because now I can't even write anything without a laptop. And obviously when I grew up, there was no phone, nothing. But I carry my cell phone all the time. I can't even do without my cell phone. So what I'm saying is you get on with the change, whether a personal change or even the corporations as well. If you don't get on with the change, and you don't really have any corporation anymore. So in the digital world, yes, absolutely. You really get on with the change, and you reinvent. You use appropriate technology and the right type of process to really leverage and embrace the change.

KENNEALLY: I was going to say – you may be an *ajja*, Shankar, but that doesn't mean you're not relevant to the discussion today. Certainly, it's interesting to speak with



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you. In the book, you refer to a number of inspirational quotes from various thinkers and leaders, and you say that your favorite quote is by Mahatma Gandhi, who said, “you want to be the change you want to see in others.” Tell us why you’re inspired by those words, and how have you tried to live by them?

HEGDE: Well, it’s not easy to live by those words. Mahatma Gandhi was Mahatma Gandhi because he did live by those words. But I try every time I get a chance. For example, I used to take it personally when there was a difference in opinion during some heated discussions between friends, especially when those discussions centered around politics or religion – those two that we shouldn’t be really talking too much. But now, I don’t take it personally, and I don’t get mad. So I agree to disagree and move on to other topics. This is one change, at least, I want to see in others, and somehow, I did manage to change myself.

KENNEALLY: We appreciate you sharing these stories with us, and we look forward to speaking with you again. We have been speaking today with Shankar Hegde. He’s the author of *American Ajja*. Shankar Hegde, thanks so much for joining us today on Beyond the Book.

HEGDE: Chris, thank you again. I enjoyed the conversation and thank you for giving me an opportunity to do this short interview.

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Beyond the Book co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I’m Christopher Kenneally. Join us again soon on Beyond the Book.

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