

Slumdog scholars

Rasheeda Bhagat



Cricketer Sachin Tendulkar with Parikrama kids. - G.P. SAMPATH KUMAR

THE HINDU

Santosh, the son of a poor Bihari construction worker in Bangalore, is an assistant chef at the Hilton International in the Garden City. Lalcha, the son of a Manipuri worker living in a city slum, is a second-year student in the country's best law college — National Law School, Bangalore. Jalajagshi, an abandoned child, was found weeping on a street; 10 years down the line she is a qualified teacher.

All three have a single saviour in Shukla Bose, founder and CEO of Parikrama Humanity Foundation. They've all passed through collapsed learning programmes to reach their dream positions. The ₹ 25,000 Santosh earns in a month is what his father's annual toil brings home. After graduating from NLS, Lalcha wants to neither litigate nor join a hot-shot corporate law firm. He wants to join politics and do something for his State. He finds that the North Eastern States are neglected and its people get jobs in other cities only "as waiters or beauticians. That is their glass ceiling, and he wants to change that... most of our children are breaking boundaries," says Shukla.

Jalajagshi, while doing a Google search as a Parikrama school student ("all our kids are very computer-savvy, being introduced to computers in Grade 1," says Shukla), stumbled on a village she thought was faintly familiar, insisted on visiting it, found and was reunited with her parents. "She was then 17, and the only person in the village who could speak English. I thought we'd lose her, but she came back, finished her education and today teaches at our school."

At the four Parikrama schools with 1,566 students and one Junior college with 183 students, quality education is imparted in English to the poorest of kids from Bangalore's streets, slums and orphanages.

Corporate high-flyer

Shukla's story dates back to her graduation from IIM, Calcutta in 1983 and her very successful career in the corporate world, first with the Oberoi group and then as the Managing Director of the RCI, whose Indian operations she started in 1990. She was instrumental in getting Anand Mahindra interested in the holiday time-share business. "It took me seven years to convince him; recently, when we met at a conference in New York he said it is amazing how profitable this business can be if handled properly."

But while comfortably climbing the corporate ladder in her mid-30s, "by 1997, I was doing something bizarre, looking at obits and writing my own too, trying to understand from other people's lives what leaves behind an impact." Questions soon arose on the real definition of success; was excelling in her field as one of the few women CEOs and winning all the awards worth winning enough? Was writing a cheque for charity at the end of the year the only thing she could do to bring about change, she asked herself.

The answer was she needed to do something more by "getting my hands dirty to bring about change through education that mattered". Hailing from a modest background, as the daughter of a government servant who managed to go to the

best institutions aided by scholarships, Shukla had an advantage. She had volunteered for seven years with Mother Teresa in Kolkata and knew how to work in slums. So after telling her daughter, who was then studying at Oxford, and with the support of her husband, who was then in the corporate world and now a leadership consultant and “my financier”, she quit her job in 2003, put together her entire life’s savings of over ₹ 80 lakh, and started Parikrama.

Shukla explains it was important to take risk and bring to the table her own money to “prove to people that my plan would indeed work”. That plan was to provide quality education to the poorest of poor kids and get them into high-end jobs and “not as liftmen in IBM. That is happening, and that is the story I have to tell,” says Shukla, all excited.

The first school

Her first school was planned on her kitchen table and came up on a rooftop in a Koramangala slum “where 75,000 lived below the poverty line. It was with 165 children and the rent was ₹ 2,700.”

But far from being inundated with applications, she had to go from door to door in the slum, look for children who would not go to school, and convince parents of both boys and girls — she now has 60 per cent girls — to send them to school. Owing to fears of ongoing rackets in slums, including organ theft, there was a lot of reluctance. So she had to employ social workers who knew the slum-dwellers before she could employ teachers.

As the salary was modest at ₹ 5,000, slowly 11 teachers joined, taking a salary cut because they “believed that such a change can happen”. Shukla says she has a module through which kids speak and understand English in three months.” To make learning a fun experience and keep the children hooked to school, the Parikrama model employs certain criteria. First, there is no learning by rote and hence no textbooks or exams till Class 8. “Once the teachers begin to depend on textbooks it automatically becomes learning by rote.”

Three meals, no holidays!

The other huge incentive is wholesome and nutritious meals, three times a day. Parikrama spends about ₹ 27,000 a year on each child for transport, food, uniforms and total healthcare. Getting a nutritious breakfast, lunch and a protein-rich drink that can substitute for the evening meal is motivation enough for parents to send the children to school. “I cannot have school holidays because my kids will starve as they come from households with income of barely ₹ 4,500, with 4-5 people to feed. That is why we have 96 per cent attendance, the highest in the country, and the lowest dropout rate at less than one per cent.”

The organisation has also brought about community integration; the breakfast is prepared by fathers who were once alcoholics; they’ve been rehabilitated, trained and given soft loans to start their own kitchens. For mothers, most of whom work as maids, there are tailoring and embroidery classes for extra income, as well as spoken English classes.

From struggling to convince parents she had no hidden agenda, Shukla’s problem today is turning away applicants. Each year she can enrol 120 students; this year, when the Parikrama brand turned 10, there were 720 applications. “The screening process is so tough, so traumatic that my admission committee needs some therapy because you hear such stories that touch your heart, but we can’t accommodate everybody.”

Meeting costs

Last year the Foundation’s running cost was ₹ 5.7 crore, and she depends hugely on corporate support and donations. “Sometimes corporates think their time is more important than money. But for NGOs like us, money is very important; I need to pay salaries.”

Fortunately, Adobe Foundation takes care of 40 per cent of the running costs and she has on board companies like Yahoo! “There is this amazing story of how Yahoo! employees collect money every month, and with help from the company, take care of one whole school.” The average cost comes to ₹ 60-80 lakh, and this is their own initiative, she says.

Help also comes from celebrities and others. As many of the children dream of becoming space scientists, a retired NASA scientist runs a space club for the Foundation. “We know not many of them can become space scientists, but at least the children will become rational thinkers and not give in to superstitions. We ban girls from staying at home when they are menstruating and we have mixed football teams, so girls play football too,” says Shukla.

Celebrities like Amitabh Bachchan and Sachin Tendulkar have visited her centres and participated in their programmes, “but I’m not too dependent on celebrities. Their position and fortunes fluctuate; our brand is too precious to allow it to be impacted by them,” she says.

What next? Not necessarily to have more Parikrama schools, she says. She is proud that in four years 400 of her children will be in the best colleges. “But we want to share all our learning through our Education Transformation Centre, where we’re creating training modules, where government schools can also train.” The way forward will be to

replicate the Parikrama model; “I will teach other people to set up such schools... which will say: ‘This school follows the Parikrama Way’, which we have trademarked!”

Her dream is a day in the future when she attends the morning assembly in a wheelchair to watch the school being run by Parikrama children. “This will be the generation next... we’re trying to create citizens — and not consumers — who are patient and tolerant, ethical and compassionate, secular and pluralist, global in their thinking and, above all, the critical thinkers that India needs so badly,” she adds.

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