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Students from slums speak

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The paintings are of a surprising level of sophistication.

Expecting to go 'ahhttp:www' over childish scribbles and colourful excesses on canvas, one is taken aback at finding true skill and the evidence of emotional depth. The paintings are framed in simple black and stacked against the walls of the art room at Parikrma Centre for Learning - one of the four schools run

by the Parikrama Humanity Foundation - in Jayanagar, and they are ready to be transported to an art gallery, where they will be exhibited and sold over the next few days.

"We find that our children excel specifically in some things, though many of them do very well in academics too. Sports and art two fields in which they find great self-expression, and some of the artwork is quite sophisticated. Of course, our art teachers are very talented too, and guide the children throughout," says Shukla Bose, founder of Parikrama Humanity Foundation, a nonprofit organization that has been running free English medium schools for underprivileged children since 2003, when Bose left a top-rung corporate career to chase the dream of providing equitable education to all children.

The paintings stacked at the Parikrama school in Jayanagar are there for a special reason: this is the organisation's first 'Art for Heart' exhibition in Bangalore and it's taking place this weekend. Similar shows have taken place over the past few years at New York and San Francisco. Bose laughs when asked why she took the children's paintings to the US first before having an exhibition in Bangalore. "It was all serendipity, really. One of our patrons saw the paintings and was quite impressed. He knows a gallery owner in New York, who agreed to give us the space for free. An international courier company agreed to ship the paintings for

free. And that's how it happened," says Bose. "In Bangalore, too, one of our alumni came and said, 'let's do it at Gallery G.' This show is being helmed largely by our former students," she adds.

The first Parikrama school came up in Koramangala on the terrace of an old house with just 160 students. Bose's vision was a simple one: underprivileged children don't just need an education, they need an education that can help them get ahead in life. "I started asking myself, 'why don't we see them in IT companies, except as lift operators or as cooks in the canteen? Why do they naturally gravitate towards low-paying jobs and not towards careers?'" says Bose. Many of these workers are educated - after a fashion. But they lack the skills and the confidence needed to work in white-collar sectors, and Parikrama set out to change this.

Bose believes that the reasons for drop-outs and low attendance have little to do with midday meals or toilets or reading programs or teacher retention. "The content itself is so poor and delivered even more shabbily, that a child does not wish to come to school. With no visible change in the children, parents have no option but to allow them to drop out and get them into some work, if possible. Earning that Rs 30 a day seems a far better option than sending a child to a school where there is no learning," she says.

The organization realized that there is a huge gap between those who get good education in private schools and those who have access only to sub-standard government schooling and low-cost, poor quality private schools that feed parents' desire to send their children to an 'English school.' They also found out that to ensure that the child learns well and continues learning till he/she is job ready, there is a need to look at the life of a child in its entirety and intervene appropriately. The 'Parikrma Model' believes in a 360-degree intervention in the life of a child - from the time the child enters the school at five plus till he or she leaves, usually after class 12 board exams, the foundation provides not just quality English-language education at par with any good private school in the city, but also 88% of the child's nutritional needs at school through three meals a day, comprehensive health care, and intervention at the family level if necessary. This means if a child's home life is unstable - say due to an alcoholic father - the school sends the father for de-addiction, tries to get the mother employed, and advises the family. All parents of the 1600 Parikrma students are assisted in getting their own bank accounts, and many of them are employed at the schools.

Along with this, students who graduate from Parikrma's schools and PU college are helped to get into college, earn scholarships and enter vocational training if they want. Some of their success stories are truly encouraging: one of its students just finished his engineering and got employed by Cisco, another started work as a

sous chef at Hilton International, and a third is studying science at a top city college.

"In fact, many of our ex students who are doing well in life are coming forward saying they want to help. They are my succession plan," says Bose.
