

At Parikrma, learning is a way of life

'Our children have attended the global youth leadership summit in San Diego, many have been chosen for the Duke University Talent Identification programme, three students represented India in Taekwondo in the South Asian rounds and are preparing for the global challenge now'. That may sound like something out of a brochure for a high-end private school. But the children referred to are all from the slums, first generation school-goers in their families, who go home to a wretched existence with alcoholic fathers, browbeaten mothers, where electricity and clean drinking water are luxuries they can scarcely imagine. The transformation in their lives is due to the Parikrma Humanity Foundation.

Founded by Shukla Bose, the principle that drives the Parikrma Humanity Foundation appears to be quality, quality and quality. "In India, we tend to get very caught up with numbers," says Shukla Bose. "But we must remember it's not just about dishing out charity to slum children." It is the philosophy that has put the Parikrma Centres for Learning in a different league of charity work. Children who had nowhere to go find themselves getting an education and a way of life that only the affluent can usually hope to have.

"I was in corporate life for 26 years, running start-ups and a fairly profitable organisation in the hospitality business," says Shukla. "After a while, though, I felt it was necessary to make some fundamental difference by doing something more long-term and meaningful." She gave up her corporate successes, much to the surprise of people around her. "People leave corporate life when it's time to retire or when they are dissatisfied, but not many leave it when they are on a high," she says, adding, "But why start social work only when you're too old to do any work? Why not do it when you actually do have the energy for it?" When Parikrma began, the original headquarters was organised around Shukla's kitchen table!

As the nation is grappling with a situation as stupefying as 100 million children who cannot read or write, people do tend to get caught up with statistics, delving far too deep into how many children enrol in schools and how many attend. What actually happens in school is the question, Shukla argues. "Now and then, there is a bid to revamp the curriculum, but there is nothing wrong with the curriculum itself, just how it is delivered."

According to Shukla, her school can boast of a 96% attendance rate every day over the past nine years, and a dropout rate that is less than 1%, the lowest in the country. "I am no educationist, no wealthy funder," she says. "But I want to do what I do so well that it will become a leadership model that can be replicated."

High quality teachers are the bedrock of Parikrma. "We want people who are truly committed to what they do, are passionate about children and who believe that education is the only way to change," she says. To see a child sitting on her teacher's lap, being helped with her work is a common occurrence at Parikrma. "We have collaborated with children from high end schools in California; they do projects together on Skype," she says. "These things are never, ever, thought of for children from slums and I'm not sure why."

It doesn't just end with providing the child education, either. The organisation helps put alcoholic parents into de-addiction centres, provides mothers with income generation programmes and even adult education programmes for

interested mothers. "Our job doesn't end with providing a happy school environment," says Shukla. "Education isn't effective unless the home environment is stable." Parikrma provides more than school education; it is a way of life that will hold the kids in good stead for the rest of their lives, providing them with a safe, protected environment. "There is no room for abuse or ill-treatment of any kind because the system is so transparent," says Shukla. The best measure of success is, beyond doubt, the happiness of the child.

So, on Saturdays, if you have the children following you around, with the plaintive little refrain, "Akka, why can't we have school on Sunday," then, one supposes it's a job well done. The Parikrma Humanity Foundation is looking for teachers. Those interested can write to teacher@parikrmafoundation.org.