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Destiny's child

A class Act -Parikrma humanity foundation has been responsible for helping thousands of slum children get an education. Anisha Mehta meets the woman behind the scene.

As I walk into the Parikrma humanity foundation's Jayanagar School, I am in awe. In all classrooms, kids are busy solving maths puzzles, involved in activity-based learning, learning music or practicing a dance routine. The excitement of these children to learn something new is palpable. All because they can now enjoy the privilege millions of other kids in India are blessed with-education. Parikrma humanity foundation has made it possible for underprivileged kids from slums across Bangalore to dream; to believe that they too deserve quality education, nutritious meals (that the school provides them with every day) and comprehensive healthcare and family care.

Walking past the signature bright blue walls of the school, I meet Shukla Bose (56), founder and CEO of Parikrma humanity foundation. Her personality is filled with warmth; her story an inspiration. Born and brought up in Darjeeling, her birth was itself symbolic. Her mother had suffered many miscarriages before giving birth to her and therefore, she was considered to be a boon. "My parents never made me feel that I was a burden. They were proud that they had a daughter", she says.

An honest government official, her father could never provide his family with luxuries. While other kids came to school in chauffeur-driven cars, she walked six kilometers every day to reach her school, Loreto convent. But she never regrets the upbringing she said. "Unlike my peers, I wouldn't while away my time in the canteen or just hang out with my friends. I always knew I was different, purposeful. Perhaps, it was the pressure that my parents put on me to concentrate only on academics and nothing else", she shares.

She later moved to Kolkata and completed her MA in comparative literature from Loreto College. It was these years that introduced Bose to the social service sector. When she was just 17, she volunteered with missionaries of Charity.

She reminisces, "Mother Teresa once told me, 'in a closed room, always keep a window open. You never know, an opportunity might just come by'. I always treasured her advice which has helped me through those 26 years I worked for the corporate industry." However, she always was inclined to do social work. In 2000, when she was at the peak of her career, she quit corporate life and helped start and manage an international NGO in Bangalore. "The experience helped me understand how to run an NGO. I realized that even if you want to make a difference in the social sector, it can be done in an organized fashion.

An emotional-fulfilling journey

In 2003, Shukla Bose started Parikrma from her kitchen table. Bose chose to work for children's education as she could foresee making a constructive change in the field. "Also, the responsibility of helping mould a child's future seemed emotionally fulfilling," she avers. She along with her husband invested their life savings and the money they had pooled in for their daughter's education into the

project. "I remember calling my daughter, who was then studying in the US, and asking her if she could manage her own finances. She supported us and that's when we established our first school in a slum in Bangalore." Bose would walk across slums, talking to people, identifying children who could never go to school, try and convince their parents that their kids needed education and that it would bring a positive change to their lives. "It was emotionally wrenching," she says, "especially when for decades in my life I was use to travelling first class, wearing expensive clothes and shoes and now I couldn't afford all that. But I never regretted the change, I am from a modes background and I can never forget that. This experience helped me understand the difference between powerful and feeling empowered. "Wearing shoes which cost the equivalent of ten kids' school fees seemed petty."

Humble Beginnings

Parikrma's first school was on top of a two storey building. Sitting under a tin roof that partially covered them, classes were conducted for 165 students. It has been eight years, and today, Parikrma has 1300 students from slums and orphanages in the city, studying under the ICSE Board across four schools in Bangalore and a junior college. The foundation funs the entire education expenses of a child, right from kindergarten to class 12. The Organization also provides scholarships and other options for children to go through professional college or vocational training before they are ready to apply for jobs. She reveals that although she started off a little arrogant, believing that she could change the world and eradicate illiteracy with this venture, these eight years have made her more humble and in tune with reality. "We believe in taking in one child at a time. We have proudly proved all those cynics wrong who doubted if a child from a slum could ever speak fluent English, could ever do well in academics or mingle with children from other mainstream schools. Our students have represented our school at national and international sports events, global summits and have done exceedingly well in academics. Many of our students are now enrolled in engineering colleges; some are working too-as teachers and engineers."

Her life revolves around Parikrma and Bose has absolutely no time for herself. However, whenever she can, she immerses herself in words, writes poetry, collects art and dreams about Parikrma's growth. She hopes that in the future, kids are not deprived of their right to education.

Bose doesn't take a single rupee as salary but is content with life. "I aspire that these students grow up to be compassionate individuals who come back and share some responsibility towards educating other children," she says. As for her, she always knew she was born to do this. "I look back and I know that helping corporates earn profits, leading a life of pure wants was never satisfying. Leading a simple life and making a difference was what I was born for. It is my destiny."