



HARBINGER OF CHANGE Bhagya Rangachar

Building castles of love and trust

WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE Meet Bhagya Rangachar, who has brightened up the lives of scores of underprivileged kids through an initiative called 'e-patashale', says **Sumana Bharadwaj**

Children in tattered clothes sit on huge piles of sand under the afternoon sun. Wiping their runny noses with tiny, grubby hands, they build sand castles imitating their parents who are building real castles of cement and stone for the rich. This is a scene so familiar to us, city slickers, that it hardly evokes any emotion or provokes any action.

But not so for Bhagya Rangachar. A sight as common as this changed the entire course of her life. Questions started plaguing her: why were the poor kids being denied the right to education; why should they miss out on opportunities to build their own dreams? Such thoughts eventually led her to set up the Children's LoveCastles Trust (CLT) near Jakkur in Bangalore, with the aim of creating learning opportunities for all children — anywhere, anytime.

Bhagya is a software professional. Having gone to the United States when she was in her teens, she found it harder to move back to India with every passing year, as her family and commitments grew in the US.

"There was a certain restlessness even in the smooth rhythms of my life abroad," she recalls. She decided to return to India after her mother's demise to be with her father. This was 13 years ago and Bhagya has not gone back to the US since then.

During the first few months of her stay here, she happened to accompany a bunch of kids from a construction site to the local government school, where they were studying.

"Children were fed lessons after lessons in History, Math and English, but were fed no food. How could they concentrate on lessons on empty stomachs," she wondered.

She launched a mid-day meal programme at that government school. The programme was successfully implemented in many schools for eight years before it became a State Government programme.

Once the mid-meal programme was up and running in eight schools, Bhagya started working towards enhancing the quality of education in these schools — a task fraught with challenges.

"The teacher-student ratio was 1:50 and children of different grades were grouped together due to an acute shortage of teachers and resources," she says.

Convinced that technology had the ability to transfer best teaching practices and learning aids to remote and needy classrooms, Bhagya and a team of volunteers worked on converting state syllabus text books into vibrant multimedia modules, using local images and local context that children could relate to.

This model of content development on CDs, while enabling easier access and sharing of resources at a lower cost, transformed the experience of classroom learning for the children.

The mechanical transfer of information from text books to blackboard to children's notebooks changed to lively, informative sessions of learning.

"A resource centre was set up in one of the schools. This centre became a feeder school for other schools in nearby villages, where teachers were taught to use ICT tools to evolve better teaching methods," she explains. Thus was born the CLT's e-learning initiative called *e-patashale*.

The CLT team has developed content for grades 1 to 7 in both Kannada and English so far and is currently working on developing content for high school students. So far around 100 schools in the state, even in places like Raichur, are benefiting from *e-patashale*.

Bhagya also runs an after-school programme called the Intel Computer Clubhouse Network (ICCN), in partnership with the Boston Museum of Science, MIT Media-lab and Intel Foundation. The programme is about young people, in the age group of 9 to 19, coming together after school, to discuss and develop ideas under adult supervision. It is also about building lasting relationships with their mentors and peers while conceptualising innovative projects using technology.

The programme is available to children in five-six villages around the centre. The activities at the clubhouse range from learning to use Flash and Photoshop to creating 2D animation to building robots.

Bhagya also runs programmes, like computer camps to demystify technology and health awareness camps, for women in villages. As she marches ahead with unwavering focus and a deep commitment to her mission, which is to help children build their own castles of self-belief, trust and achievement, all misgivings one may ever have harboured about the power of one are firmly quelled.