



CHILDREN'S LOVECASTLES TRUST - INDIA

The godmother of hungry students

Mid-day meals was first introduced in a government school back in 1997 before it became a state government policy to implement it in all its schools five years ago. Meet Bhagya Rangachar who pioneered mid-day meal programmes.

Sudha Narasimhachar , 26 May 2010

"From my apartment window I would see children building castles out of mud. Kids who should be spending their time in school were out accompanying their parents at the construction.

This scene which resonated with me would repeat itself day after day until I realized a universal truth - Children loved building castles, homes - a place of belonging, whether at a beach, a playground or here at a construction site.

Children's Lovecastles Trust (CLT) was borne out of a passion to keep kids in school. To give them the education they deserve, so they can go build on their dreams and aspirations."

Meet Bhagya Rangachar and you would be amazed at the deep-rooted concern that she has for the lakhs of children belonging to the economically challenged section of the society. Many children living just a few miles away from the bustling city of Bangalore do not have access to many basic needs of life.



Bhagya Rangachar. Pic: Sudha Narasimhachar.

Bhagya was born in a small town of Gorur, Hassan, as the eldest of eight children to Ramaswamy Iyengar, a teacher. She moved to the US as an eighteen-year-old bride of economist Rangachar, a World Bank Consultant, just after she graduated in Physics and Chemistry from the University of Mysore.

Bhagya's elder daughter Asha, is a Speech Therapist in the US and son Harsha is doing his medical internship in MS Ramaiah College, Bangalore. Youngest daughter Radhika is doing her MBA from Boston University. She also happens to be

the great niece of Kannada poet Gorur Ramaswamy Iyengar and Captain Gopinath, the aviation business magnate is her brother.

Her journey

"I had come to Bangalore, after my mother's demise to spend a year with my father in 1997 along with Radhika. She was admitted in a local school for a year with the plan of going back to the US the following year. Little did I know that I would settle down here. There was a very spontaneous stirring within me to follow my instincts and the birth of Children's Lovecastles Trust

(CLT) India the same year! Much to my delight, Radhika had decided to stay here for another four years, followed by Harsha", says Bhagya.

Bhagya saw a few children going to Basavangudi Government School, which is located near her house, without lunch boxes in their hands. This disturbed her. That was not a small issue to be ignored by socially conscious Bhagya.

In fact even in Washington DC, though she worked as a software professional for more than twelve years for several IT companies, she was always drawn to community service. There were periods where she had taken breaks from her job to work in the non-profit sector. She gained a lot of insight working for Volunteers for Visually Handicapped, both as a Mentor and as an Executive Director for two years.

She felt she should start a mid-day meal program for the 250 children of the Basavangudi Government School. With the help of Ramaswamy Iyengar, a retired Joint Director of Public Instructions, CLT was born in 1997, later to be called as CLT India, which now operates from Jakkur.

"Funding was only one issue. I took on the responsibility personally as we had no staff to entrust with the stock of groceries and vegetables. So, every day I would drive to school with a car full of groceries and vegetables for the day and wait for the cook to arrive, and join the teachers to serve the food. I felt no child can concentrate on anything unless he is fed properly".

Though the task was quite taxing, especially after she shifted to Sadashivnagar she did not give up. In addition, she even formed clusters of women's groups under the name Food Bank volunteers and CLT adopted ten other government schools. This went on for seven years till the Government of Karnataka introduced the mid-day meal scheme about five years ago.

"Now, my focus is shifted to the quality of education in government schools, where many times each teacher had to take care of multiple classes and the children came from the under-served communities with little or no parental support. How do we keep the children in schools and secondly, how do we engage them and inspire them to learn? These were the challenges. How can I leverage something I know to support the school system to be more effective?"



The well-equipped computer lab. Sudha Narasimhachar.

Private schools were updating themselves and the children were getting exposed to latest technologies. But government school teachers had to still follow the old pattern of text-book teaching with blackboard as the only teaching aid. Of course, these were basic and evergreen but technology could enable these teachers in making learning a rich experience.

'Srujana' was born nine years ago inside the campus of Government school, Jakkur village. She located the learning centre

there because it is a feeder school to many schools of the surrounding ten villages where CLT was serving mid-day meals. Srujana has a well-equipped library, a computer lab and a science lab.

"Many kind-hearted people had come forward to help us set up this modest center with cash contribution for the building, used computers through their company, books through reading clubs of Virginia and other equipments."

The idea was to support teachers with teaching-aids and introduce the rural children to new ways of learning through technology and books and hands-on. The results were amazing. Children bloomed into very beautiful knowledge sources. Exposure is all about the impetus

CLT Clubhouse

Seeing its success, eight years ago, CLT India was selected by Intel Foundation for one of their innovative learning models - Intel Computer Club House that won the prestigious Peter F Drucker Award. This is in partnership with Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Media Lab and Boston Museum of Science and has been hosted in 100 centres in 25 countries. In India CLT India is the only centre.

CLT Clubhouse is an after-school constructivist learning model for children in under-served communities. It gives an impetus to the intellectual growth of the children to explore, experiment, collaborate and learn. The centre has volunteers and mentors. Children have produced short films and music videos, which are very promising.

A 7-minute film on how urban development has gobbled up simple villages and killed their culture, taking Arkavathi Layout project as the example is one of the short films that the children of CLT Clubhouse have produced. Such models are normally accessible only to the children in the elite schools of the private sector. But Bhagya's vision is to give equal opportunity to all children.

"Of course, I was proud to be selected for this. The villagers of Jakkur were very supportive and helped me get this land adjacent to Srujana, from the Government on lease. Though the funding was just for the first three years, Intel Foundation continues to give us the network support till today. Once in every two years, an international meet of Clubhouse Members from all the 100 centres is convened in Boston and I am happy that three students from CLT Clubhouse get the opportunity to attend the meet every time."

A class room with E-Patashala facility. Pic: Sudha Narasimhachar.

With the success that programme gave her, she wanted to create a learning model that was scaleable and replicable to support state board schools. It was important it was localised, simple and accessible and was an inclusive model. Thus 'E-Patashale' was born.

Over the last three years, Bhagya and her team of enthusiastic employees, volunteers and visiting students from the National University of Singapore have created e-lesson modules in English and Kannada for state board middle schools. It is a teaching aid for teachers and an alternative learning model for children, as well. All the school needs is a working computer beside the blackboard and a Digital Video Disc (DVD) player.



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"The software is simple and user friendly. With a day's orientation about technology-mediation, off they go back to their schools better equipped by just clicking the mouse of the computer. We are working with sixty government schools already and you won't believe how the teachers from the first 20 odd schools inspired the other schools to be part of E-Patashale program. "

E-lesson modules

The e-content and teachers' training workshops have been imparted free of cost to the 60+ schools. These programmes have not only increased the attendance percentage of students in schools of Jakkur but also produced some outstanding students who are pursuing their professional degrees. CLT India also has scholarship programmes and the entire cost of educating the top three students up to the levels they choose is taken over by them, besides awarding one-time scholarships to many.

Besides main programmes in education, CLT India has undertaken many community development programmes like rainwater harvesting projects for the villages, health camps, parenting programme, micro-finance , rehabilitation programme in a Tsunami-affected village of Tamilnadu, women empowerment programmes and so on at various times.

Just a visit to CLT will give you a more complete picture of this beautiful project. ☺

Sudha Narasimhachar

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