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Special

Lessons in hope

Twelve years after she pioneered the mid-day meal scheme, Bhagya Rangachar is living her dream of seeing marginalised children using technology to improve their learning in government schools

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She is, by her own admission, an impatient woman. But if you are like Bhagya Rangachar, helming the affairs of an NGO working to strengthen government schools, a slight impatience is par for the course. "Except for a small percentage, government schools are the only option for mainstream India. We have to make them work," is her refrain.

We meet Bhagya at her office. The idyllic setting lends an at-home feeling. And before you know it the conversation's unspooled itself with Bhagya talking about her biggest work yet - Children's Lovecastles Trust (CLT).

EVOLVING EVERY DAY

"We are a 12-year-old organisation but our vision, since the beginning has never changed: to build a support system for underprivileged children," she says. Of course, programmes have changed and evolved over the years.

"Sometimes, needs you start with, change." So where nutrition was the primary need 12 years ago, the focus changed some time back to, "How do we integrate technology to educate the children?" She explains, "We wanted to demystify technology to these kids and teachers. The moment you make it simple, the faster they accept it."

Today the peeling-plaster walled classrooms in 70 Government schools from nearby districts have transformed to e-learning classrooms. Teachers teach through both, school text books and ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools - TV, PC and remote control, in other words.

LEARNING BY DOING

In addition to ensuring better learning for kids during school, CLT also has an after-school programme. Bhagya's eyes especially light up talking about this initiative. She takes us to the sun-lit room where kids in various groups sitting in front of their computers, are busy creating 2-D animation and building robots. Making films, short animation movies, learning Flash, Photoshop, designing websites et al, the after-school programme enables kids in the 9-19 age group to 'learn by doing.' The programme is available to children in five-six villages around the centre.

"It's collaborative peer learning and we don't touch curricula at all. There are no adults here, just two mentors and the kids," she smiles. Hosted by CLT in partnership with the Boston Museum, MIT Media-lab and Intel Foundation, the impact of the after-school programme on the kids has been "mind blowing. It has made them so open-minded," she exults. She also lets on that every two years, three children are sent to Boston.

Talking about the impact these programmes have on the the kids, she says, "They have the 'Yes, I can' attitude; that 'I am no different.'"

IT ALL STARTED ONE DAY

The oft-repeated story of how Bhagya struck up on the idea of mid-day meals at a government school is strikingly simple: She saw a few children going to a government school situated near her house without lunch boxes in their hands. The question, "How can kids learn on empty stomachs?" prompted her to go, shop for groceries and prepare lunch for the kids that day. It didn't end with that one day. Not only did she implement the mid-day meal scheme in the school and keep it going, she adopted more schools into the process until the state government stepped in and took it into its purview.

So, what impelled her to start the scheme and keep going instead of giving up after a day? "It is difficult to say," she candidly states and then after some thought adds, "It's a deep emotional stirring. It is a feeling you wake up with and go to bed with. It moves you to do it. The stirring is so deep, it's here," Bhagya says, pointing to her heart.

And, once she had started it, "There was no going back. I didn't know it would go on for so long. I had come with my daughter and if she wanted to go back to the US I would have gone back too. It just so happened that my daughter stayed back and I continued."

She is quick to add, "Whatever you do, the scale doesn't matter. You start with something small, the momentum builds and one school becomes eight which grows to sixty four! The momentum just builds up and there are so many people who join you." Citing her own case, she says, "I may be the contact point for CLT but so many people are involved in it."

She fondly adds, "Every brick in the building has been contributed by someone." Bhagya calls herself and the CLT team of 30 "a bunch of mad people."

TRY ONE MORE TIME

There are lessons that are learnt in a journey as momentous as Bhagya's. The predominant lesson the experience has taught her, is patience.

As she puts it, "I am an impatient person by nature; the kind who has jumped ahead to answer the next question while you are still discussing the current question." Her initiative has taught her "Patience to try things till the end."

To illustrate this point, she cites a recent incident. "There was this child who had been selected to go to Boston. There was a problem with his visa but I did everything to ensure he got it. We just kept pushing, made calls to whoever we could. We just kept making that 'one more call.' It was a lifetime opportunity for him and I didn't want him to lose out for the wrong reason, for a mere technicality. We finally succeeded and he went to Boston," she says, with a beaming smile. And then with a far-away look in her eyes, Bhagya quietly adds, "That hope (that things will come through) doesn't die. That hope lingers..."

LOCALISING CONTENT

The e-learning content for the government schools are provided through e-Patashale, CLT's e-learning initiative. The idea for e-Patashale was conceived three years ago and the reason for it was simple. Bhagya explains, "The content in the government text books wasn't localised. The text says 'S' for 'Strawberry.' How would a kid who has never seen a strawberry, understand that? That's how we decided we have our own content."

Over the past three years, the idea has grown into a scalable, replicable model. "Physics, Civics, History, Geography, every subject in the state syllabus for the 5th to 7th standard classes has been mapped, in English and Kannada," she proudly reveals. Around 70 schools around the state including Raichur, Hoskote, and Nelamangala use the course content. But again, work doesn't just stop there for her. Bhagya's next targets are "to start with (providing content in) Hindi and provide lessons for 10 to 12th classes, too."

For complete information about CLT's initiatives, visit www.cltindia.org.

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