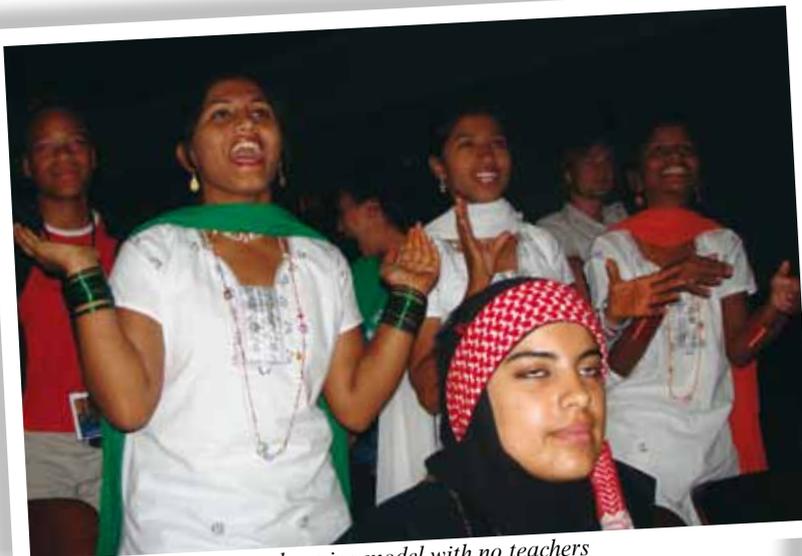


Bhagya Rangachar Chose Rural India Over USA

How many women would have given up a cushy job in the US to come back to India to make a difference to thousands of children's lives in under-served communities? TII met Bhagya Rangachar who came back ten years ago from the US on a holiday and never went back! Her involvement with an NGO led to its evolution from just a mid-day meal scheme to a complete support system for poor children.

by: Marianne de Nazareth



A self-directed, peer-peer learning model with no teachers

The building is large and airy and filled with colour flashing on sleek black plasma-screen monitors. They are the most modern, up-to-date Intel Pentium PC's with 10 to 18-year-old kids expertly handling Flash, Adobe and Photoshop programmes. No, this is not an international school on the outskirts of the city with its well heeled students

working in their computer lab. It is CLT India (Children's Lovecastles Trust), an NGO begun ten years ago by Bhagya Rangachar. The kids here are from 10 different villages around Jakkur, spending their Saturday afternoon at the CLT Learning Center - an after-school program. "CLT is not a school, but an institution that



CLT - Children Lovecastles Trust

builds a support system to the children in many government schools,” explains Bhagya.

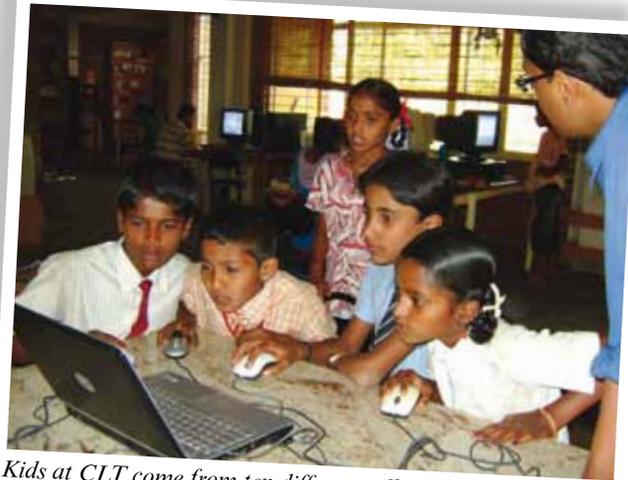
Ten years ago, she came back from the US on a holiday and never went back! Her involvement with CLT and its evolution from just a mid-day meal scheme to a complete support system is laudable. How many women would have given up a cushy job in the US to come back to India to make a difference to thousands of children’s lives in under-served communities? “Eight years ago, that was the first building constructed here, on the Jakkur school premises,” explains Bhagya, pointing to it. “It holds the computer lab, the science lab and the library. Teachers of government schools get trained to use ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools to enhance their teaching skills and to teach more effectively. We are not replacing, but strengthening the learning environment with another support system. In fact, we have built our main model for the Teachers’ Resource Centre and Children’s Learning Centre on the school grounds so that the village kids from Jakkur school can have easy access to come here during and after school hours.” In this building surrounded with the peace and quiet of the village, a group of professionals are creating multi-media educational content. “Our first package that we bought from a vendor was very expensive and not easy to scale as we adopted many more schools. So, we decided to do our own content in both English and Kannada that is affordable and accessible to all,” explains Bhagya. “These specialists are transforming state syllabus texts into vibrant multi-media content using local images, local context that the children can relate to.”

I was shown a presentation on Latitude and Longitude done by the CLT team, where graphics and animation turned an otherwise boring topic into something the kids could connect with and quickly assimilate. “This content is getting ready to go into many government schools across Karnataka under the “e-paataashale” banner,” explained Bhagya.

Walking back to their After-School Learning Centre - Computer Clubhouse, beside the computers, is the music lab. Here children have the newest rock music blasting while they try out their latest Hritik Roshan moves.

“This is the lab where they can write their own music and compose their own songs,” explains Amith, the clubhouse coordinator.

And while we watch young Bhima show off his Michael Jackson moon dance moves, I get to meet Asiya who is just back from a trip to Boston with two other girls, Padma and Manjula from Jakkur as part of the Teen Summit where 300 kids from across the world participated. It’s pretty obvious that the project is exceedingly successful in shoring up the kids’ confidence levels. CLT proudly hosts the only Computer Clubhouse in India in partnership with MIT’s Media Lab and the Boston Museum of Science and Intel Foundation, that attracts kids during after-school hours and inspires them to harness



Kids at CLT come from ten different villages around Jakkur

their own potential. As you can see, it is a self-directed, peer-peer learning model with no teachers, facilitated only by mentors. They are networked with 100 such clubhouses globally - from Asia Pacific countries to Ireland, to South Africa, Jordan to Brazil and so on. “And that is how three of our girls went to Boston recently and attended the World Teen Summit for Technology-inspired projects,” she explains.

“We also have volunteers from the spheres of theatre and art, as well as from IT companies.” So how do you fund this place is the question uppermost in my mind. “I connected with corporate houses and some of the funding is earmarked for specific projects, while most of our funding comes from CSR or Corporate

Social Responsibility budgets. Volunteers from large corporate houses come and give their time and their volunteer hours are matched with grants by their Foundations. Our volunteers' programs are very innovative, where they have painted many government schools, built close to 100 rain water harvesting tanks around Devanahalli, taught kids and have taken them on field trips! This is a 3-way-win situation, where the community gains; money earned is ploughed back into CLT's educational programs and corporate volunteers get the opportunity to connect with the communities around them. Our Blue Initiative has been about building more than 80 Rain Water Harvesting Tanks for families in four villages off Devanahalli both with Cisco and Intel volunteers" The affordability of CLT's e-Paataashale content repository for state board schools has made it highly accessible for common people and CLT seeks partnerships to increase its reach.

Bhagya Rangachar: She Never Went Back to the USA

Bhagya Rangachar was just like any other rich diplomats wife, living in Washington DC with her husband who worked for the World Bank. Bhagya had a career of her own at the time, she was a senior programmer and analyst for several IT companies. Even then, her heart was always where she could be of help and would volunteer with the juvenile diabetes association, the blind association, and adult literacy

programmes even while she was in the US.

"There was no plan," reveals Bhagya. "I was one of 8 siblings and since I had come to the US when I was 18 I was very keen on coming back to India to help my Dad who was alone since my Mum died. He had become very disoriented and so I came along with my daughter Radhika who was in the 9th Grade."

While Bhagya set up house close enough to her Dad, she saw the construction workers children who did not go to a formal school. So she would invite them home and teach them. However, she found she was getting deeper into trying to help 260 kids of the Gandhinagar government school.



Bhagya (Right) with CLT girls she recently took to Boston

They were children of construction workers, hawkers, fruit sellers and menial help and she found 90% of the children did not bring any lunch to school and did not have a proper breakfast either. Their only proper meal was when the parents came home and cooked something for

the family at night. "Here were our own kids with a fussy lifestyle where we checked labels on the food bought for them and these kids who were hungry, without anything to eat. So by the 6th grade, 60 % of them dropped out of school. That's when my first light bulb moment happened," says Bhagya. In 1997 she began her first midday meal for 260 kids. Everything from the veggies to the dal, rice and oil she bought on a daily basis and carried to the school in her tiny car, in time for the cook to come and make the meal.

To the question of how did she fund this she says, that she wrote to her friends across the US to send money for the project and they all did. " Even today I might get money from big corporations, but the CLT Christmas box still warms my heart," she says. The box was put in the office where her friends instead of giving gifts to one another on Christmas day, put the money into the box for the meal. "My friends warned me to be careful of food poisoning, but I have faith in what I do and I am happy that the scheme now has spread over 8 schools, which other rich lady friends have chipped in and manage on their own."

CLT happened after that, but this is how Bhagya came back from the US and never went back to the opulent lifestyle that she could have had. By the way, Bhagya is the younger sister of Captain Gopinath of Deccan Aviation, who changed the face of domestic travel in India.

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