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We need schools for all our children

Shashi Tharoor | Feb 17, 2008, 12.38 AM IST



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A few months ago I visited a school run by the Bangalore charity Parikrma, which offers a world-class English-language education for slum children. Interacting with the kids, who ranged in age from five-year-olds, who had just started schooling, to 16-and-17-year-olds about to take their board exams, provided no clue to their humble origins. One child spoke boldly of his plans to join the civil services. "Three years ago," Parikrma's founder, Shukla Bose, whispered to me, "I found him selling newspapers at a traffic light."

The Parikrma model sets out to prove that the poorest and most disadvantaged of India's children can, if given the education, match the best of our elite. But it is not just that Shukla takes in the poorest kids - only those whose families earn less than Rs 750 a month are eligible.

It is also that she recognises that education only succeeds if other factors work in its favour. Of what use is excellent teaching if the child is too hungry to concentrate or too undernourished for her brain to develop? So Parikrma provides all the kids with a full breakfast on arrival in the morning, a solid lunch at mid-day and a snack before they leave for home.

What if they can't afford to get to school from where their parents live? So, bus-passes are provided. But how can you expect poor kids to stay in school if their parents are ill at home and need their children's help? So, Parikrma provides healthcare assistance to the entire family during the student's years in school. And what good is a first-rate school education if the child does not have the resources or opportunities to go to college? So, Shukla has been busy fund-raising for full scholarships to send her first graduating class to university next year.

Parikrma's approach is impressive, its experience entirely positive, and the stories of its children heart-warming.




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Whereas, in Bangalore's government schools, the drop-out rate by the eighth standard is as high as 72%, and the pass rate for the higher secondary exams 8%, Parikrma's children, despite coming from poverty-stricken homes, all stay in school, and are expected to fare extremely well when the first group of them takes their board exams. What is more, to see the discipline in the smartly-uniformed children (uniforms also provided by Parikrma, of course), the intelligence shining through their scrubbed faces, the confidence in their questions to a visitor, and above all, the hope, is to see lives transformed, and futures built where there was only despair.

Parikrma is not the only example of such educational endeavour. The Shanti Bhavan school in Tamil Nadu, run by the hugely impressive Abraham George - a former army officer who made his fortune in computers and is determined to give it back through his philanthropic George Foundation - also educates slum children to the highest standards, though it does so in a boarding-school format. (The New York Times columnist Thomas L Friedman has written extensively of Shanti Bhavan in his book *The World Is Flat*.) I would not be surprised if readers write in to tell me of other charitable organisations trying to do similar work elsewhere in the country. Their methods and operating principles may vary, but the essential thing is this: they all realise that India is never going to be a great 21st century power if it doesn't educate its young - all of them, not just the ones who can

afford an education.

I am sure the government recognises this too, but it has neither the resources nor the ability to deliver quality education to all of India's children. Education is a state subject in our federal constitution, so its quality varies widely, from Kerala's 100% record in putting all children through school, to Bihar's female literacy rate of 27%. Our state governments have not been able to enroll all children between the ages of five and ten in school, nor are they able to retain the ones they enroll - some drop out because their families can't afford to keep them in school when they could be out to work in the fields or weaving rugs or making footballs, some because the teaching is so abysmal that they don't learn anything at school anyway. The result is that more Indian kids have never seen the inside of a school than those of any other country in the world. And those who have may not see a teacher, since we hold the world record for teacher absenteeism, or be given the books and learning materials without which the educational experience is incomplete.

How on earth can we maintain our much-vaunted economic growth rates if we don't produce enough educated Indians to claim the jobs that a 21st century economy offers? And how does the government expect to ever remedy the problem if it holds onto antiquated ideas about restricting educational opportunity to the non-profit sphere, when it is clear worldwide that the private sector is providing the best models for education? It is ironic that the man who bids fair to become the Bill Gates of schooling around the world is an Indian - Sunny Varkey, whose Global Education Management Systems already runs 65 for-profit schools across the Middle East, and who is the world's biggest employer of British teachers outside Britain. But this Indian cannot open

his GEMS schools in India, because our educational system won't allow him to.

That leaves us with a handful of excellent private and missionary schools, a large number of uneven (but mostly hopeless) government schools, millions of kids with no schooling at all - and the efforts of charities like Shanti Bhavan and Parikrma. I asked the Parikrma high school kids what they wanted to do in life. Sixteen opted for computer programming - a reflection of our era. One wanted to join the army, half a dozen the IAS, and one girl the CBI, "because I want to bring justice to our society." Our society needs justice - and it will only have it when we have enough schools to do justice to the potential of all our children.

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