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Schools of Hope

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W here was Parikrama born?

I worked as a volunteer with Mother Teresa for about seven years when I was a student. I wanted to make an indelible mark on my career. I did my MBA. I believed that the way to get lucky was through hard work. I went up the organisational ladder rather quickly. In 1990, I was one of the highest paid women executives in the country. As a member of industrial organisations, I would give talks on management change to large audiences, but I knew it was very difficult to embrace change. One morning, at the age of 32, I asked myself aloud – now what. In 1999, I changed my life inside out. Parikrama was born at my dining table when I decided that I wanted to work with children who are agents of change. I strongly believe they can be changed to create change.

So Parikrama is an NGO providing schooling to slum children?

We are not an NGO. We are a not-for-profit organisation doing nothing different than any other organisation. It's just that our clientele is different and so is the way we operate. But basics remain the same – we have to keep our customers happy, reach our targets within certain deadlines and at the same time, keep our operations cost-effective. Because we look at it like no other organisation, we have been able to deliver results.

There are several schools for the under-privileged children. How does Parikrama define itself?

Our centres encourage children to learn through experience, and to express themselves through various forms of art. We follow the ICSE syllabus. Parikrama then was the only ICSE school in the city to get the Derozio National Award for Excellence in Human Enrichment and Education. And this, when we had competition from the best schools in the country, some that are over a hundred years old! Our rapid English programme works very well. Children who come speaking Kannada or Tamil, Telugu

or Urdu, learn to answer in English in just about three months. We have achieved 98% attendance, less than 1% drop-out rate, and the attendance at our parents-teacher meetings is 90%. Our programmes rest on four pillars — empower, explore, express and expose.

How do you finance the centres?

We went begging for money and got films done on Parikrama and had documents prepared. The Koramangala centre with 160 children is sponsored by Royal Resorts. The building for our latest Centre for Learning at Jayanagar has been donated by the Saraswathi Memorial Trust. Pratiksha Trust sponsored our after-school programme in slums. And now we have the 'Change your world in half-a-day' programme that is inviting the entire corporate world to become stakeholders in our work. It was not difficult to get funding because I belonged to the corporate world and had my contacts. Those who knew my work knew that I was on the right track and helped in whatever way they could.

The voluntary sector views Parikrama's success as that of a 'well-funded NGO'. Is that the reason why you are successful while many others aren't?

The quality we provide at Parikrama schools is not expected of an NGO. When people come to our schools and see the painted walls and the cleanliness and classrooms filled with charts, they do say we made it possible because we are a well-funded NGO. But to have things in place does not take too much. I'd say we have been successful because our approach has been different. We are not well-funded, we are cost-effective and we make sure that the money is spent well. To our donors, when they donate meals, we send out health performance report of the students. We don't like to cry aloud that we are a school for slum children, we make it a point to make our children feel nice about their lives.

Do the children face conflicting images when they get back to their real world?

The children who come to Parikrama are from the slums. We realised that they were caught between two realities every time they came to school and returned to those narrow lanes where they lived. The school spoke about hygiene and nutrition and on

the streets, they saw huge mountains of garbage with flies buzzing. Even at home, food was not nutritious. While they learnt that dals were a part of the diet, they did not get dal at home. But we show them shades of grey.

We tell them that the way to succeed is not by taking alms or being physically assertive and that they have to acknowledge reality with dignity. And, over the years, we have seen the change. Out of the 10 houses in a row in slums, you can point out the houses where students of Parikrama reside. They are cleaner. You don't see heaps of garbage lying outside. That is the change we are seeing, how our agents of change are changing their small world.