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Student get Social

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Social service; the term brings to mind the image of a khadi clad do-gooder. The rest of us think social service is wonderful, but not for 'people like me'. Isn't it the government's responsibility to look after the welfare of the poor?

And then we shrug and say "I am too busy with my studies, with my tuitions, with my friends and my career."

Yet there are a few, who think differently. They make time to help make a difference in the lives of the underprivileged. Why do they do it? What have they experienced and learnt? Surya Ragunaathan speaks to student volunteers in different colleges to find out!

RUJIA STUDENTS

The students of Ramnarain Ruia College, Mumbai are working for the upliftment of primary education in municipal schools. BMC runs 1,177 schools in Mumbai in eight mediums - Marathi, Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Gujarati, Urdu and English (only 22). In these schools the rate of dropouts over last decade has been tremendous.

Rajkumar and team undertake at least one activity per month reaching about 50-100 people. The group holds regular public meetings with slum-dwellers and NGOs working for the improvement of primary education in the city.

The vision of Rajkumar and his



team is to spread to rural Maharashtra and connect with their friends from Tanda Biradari (NGO) working with nomadic tribes. They wish to start a project to provide them with access to schools and quality education.

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A year ago nine students of Ramnarain Ruia college - Rajkumar Janagam (catalyst), Jui Gangan, Asilata Karandikar, Kiran Karande, Prashant Tande, Sagar Shinde, Satya Naidu, Shweta Joshi and Vinith Nair came together to work for a social cause. They decided to improve primary education at municipal schools and government. run schools in Mumbai.

Says Rajkumar, "As of now we have around 80-100 people who support and mentor us casually. We have been selected to do research on our topic of interest by an organisation called PUKAR. Our study is on the acceptance of English in primary education by South Indian community residing in Dharavi." Why the South Indian community? "Because they are the most affected group in Mumbai; when they are switching to English (private) schools they lose touch with their mother tongue. But they don't want to stay in BMC schools as they don't get an English

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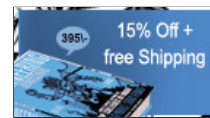
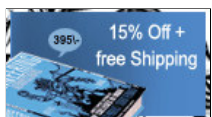
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education. So they drop out and education simply stops."

The reason why the youth starts working for a cause may be many. Some just feel the need to do something to improve others lives. Others may have personal experiences related to the cause they take up. N. Krishnan of Akshaya Trust in Madurai, watched a man eating his own excreta out of desperation. This incident motivated him to start giving free food to street dwellers.

Says Rajkumar, "I was educated in a municipal school, and then switched to a private schools. That made me realize the existence of two different countries - Bharat (municipal) and India (private). If you look at the quality of education and the eventual pass % of students you would understand what I mean"

After interacting with over 200 slum dwellers from Dharavi, Cheetah camp, Gopal Nagar, Worli, etc the Ruia team has found that the prime reason for dropout from the BMC system is lack of English education. Adds Rajkumar, "For quality improvement we've been collecting voices of parents who now have switched their children to private schools. This we do through surveys in the concerned areas."

They perform street plays to create awareness for the cause among slumdwellers and have also conducted workshops for students in Ruia, M.D. College and for DNA news staff, to educate them about RTI (Right to Information Act).

"We intend to do more of such workshops in different colleges this coming academic year."

The average amount spent for a particular activity is Rs.500 to Rs.1,000. "Yes, there are quite a few challenges. Pukar has funded our research project otherwise we would have faced a crunch. And as the research is concluding this June funds may again pose a challenge".

"Apart from this, to persuade slum dwellers to have faith on the government schools and to make them feel comfortable has been a huge challenge. Finding more like-minded people i.e. members for the team to expand, is another big challenge. We are building our website currently and it is difficult to find people who would help us do that."

And finally, social workers are often bothered by family members who feel "all this is a waste of time". If you are a student, expectations are at their peak. Today, every parent wants their child to score high marks, get the best jobs and earn a good living. What happens when the parent realizes their child wants to work for others, even if that means earning much less than what his classmates would in the corporate world?

Rajkumar says with a smile, "I have never had any problems from my family. They know that I can take care of myself and have faith in me. I have been recently selected for a part time MBA course in Social entrepreneurship at NMIMS University, I think I am on the right track and have a very positive feeling about the impact of our activities and the growth of our organization."

BITS STUDENTS

Former President APJ Abdul Kalam once asked some schoolchildren, "Who is our enemy?" Many answers came up, but the one which all agreed with came from a child named Snehal Thakkar, "Our enemy is poverty". This inspired Kalam to write the book 'Ignited Minds'.

Similarly, poverty inspired a group of students at BITS Pilani. These students are involved in educating the rural people along with creating employment opportunities. They have a presence in five states.

Nirmaan is a close knit organization. Almost everyday you can see a group of Nirmaan guys at SAC (Student activity Centre) in the BITS-Pilani campus.

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Nirmaan comprises over 80 engineering students of BITS and includes over 400 members across the country. It is a well established organization with a central committee of BITS alumni as mentors. Nirmaan aims to establish a poverty free society thereby making an economically empowered and knowledge driven India. Their main areas of work are education and employment.

Says Naresh K, "We live in a campus without any problem of water, electricity or sanitation. Cycle just one to two kms outside the campus, and you experience the bare realities of rural India. We used to go down

to the villages early in the morning to experience serenity, but to our horror we encountered poverty and pain. We then decided to do something for our people. Their lives will always be a motivation for us.”

It began as an informal group of like minded students brainstorming over coffee mugs in the dead of the winter nights. In July 2007, BITSians got themselves registered as Nirmaan. BITSians have been their brand ambassadors and the team expects other institutes to join in future.

Unlike other students groups, Nirmaan works more professionally. There are two main groups of operation - employment and knowledge - under which students take up different projects. There are also teams for human resources and public relations which do resource building activities for the organization.

With respect to E\education, Nirmaan conducts Gyan Bodh, an evening school for under privileged kids and. School Adoption Program (SAP) to renovate local schools, i.e., improve infrastructure and teaching facilities. Another project is Village Knowledge Centers where libraries are established and awareness programs on health, education, career, agriculture, etc are imparted.

Says Naresh, “The employment wing has self help groups for women; they are given training in stitching and handicrafts. Nirmaan Training Centers are established in the villages of Khedla and Bhaas. We collaborate with organizations like Sohard and Mandelia Institute to provide them with market and to transfer the best practices.”

Nirmaan takes up eight projects in each term and some events at their annual culfest, Oasis, and techfest, Apogee, reflect their commitment. Some events include E-Sol'V (Engineering Solutions to Villages), Techno Vision, paper presentation contests and an India Quiz.

It all sounds pretty challenging! Says Naresh, “We have strived hard to create professionalism in the organization. A big challenge is that most of us don't belong to this area so there is poor support from the villages. Obtaining the required financial inputs has also been a challenge, which we are trying to cope with the newly formed sponsorship and marketing team.”

Nirmaan has devised an innovative solution to the fund raising issue - the 'Save One Rupee Per Day For The Nation' scheme. Major contributions for projects come from the alumni of BITS-Pilani and some companies like Modelytics Pvt Ltd, ANZ, etc. “The faculty has also been a constant support” adds Naresh.

This year Nirmaan plans to establish full fledged production units for stitching and handicrafts, implement SAP in at least four schools and initiate Nirmaan in at least two other institutes in Rajasthan.

Does this volunteer work affect their focus on career and studies? And what do their parents feel about it? Naresh says, “We don't have a different priority, we have an additional priority - to stand up for the country and our fellow people. A person in Nirmaan ought to be an achiever be it academics or extra activities. We support our families as much as we support the country.”

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