



What Price Education?



A little boy, 9 years old walks on. He left home at 6 o'clock in the morning and does not quite know why the rickshaw he takes daily along with 10 other children did not come. Even the bus is gone. He looks at his 4 year old cousin Payal and wonders if she will make it. They both walk on and on and on.

The sun is high in the sky, temperature is nearing 33°C and rising. There is dust hitting their faces when the traffic speeds by. The school bag on his shoulder weighs heavily in the heat and he smiles at his cousin as if to reassure her that the goal is not too far. He wonders what he will miss today. He so wants to learn. He wants to know about the world around him and beyond. He wants to be able to read so he can help his dad with road signs, help his grandfather when he needs to visit the doctor's surgery or just help his mum do the sums to know for sure they will have enough money to buy the groceries that week. There is so much he wants to do when he grows up. But first he needs to be able to get to the school. Not just any school but a very special school which makes learning fun and exciting. The school where his parents' financial, economic or social standing do not matter. The teachers want the children to come to school everyday. They want them to embrace the love for learning.

He walks on holding on to his tiny cousin who is beginning to show fatigue. He talks to her gently hoping to take her mind off the tiredness. He reminds her of the colour and shape names she learnt the previous day. He wonders what the teachers will say when he arrives over 2 hours late. Will they be cross? Should he have given up and gone home? Will his Mami get cross for making Payal walk over 8 kilometres to school?

Rajdeep also remembered the visit to the big school at Chaparda where nearly 1800 children lived and learnt together. He loved the vast compound which was clean and inviting. There was a big hall with a stage, lots and lots of classrooms, lots of grassed areas to play on and fields for team games. There were computers and big canteens where children could eat as much as they liked and the meals had so many items! He also liked Babu who was kind and well loved and respected by all. Babu wanted all children to do well and have a bright future. Rajdeep wondered if he would ever be able to go to that school. He wanted to go to the big school and then go to college. He did not know yet what job he wanted to do but he hoped he would be able to look after his parents. Oh what he would give for a place at a school like that!

Rajdeep concentrates on the road ahead; working out a safe place to cross the road. He wonders why the traffic moves so chaotically. He waits patiently and reminds Payal not to run as the cars zoom noisily past them. He cheers up Payal as they recognise the familiar landmarks nearer the school. There is the bus stop with just two elderly men waiting, wiping the sweat from their foreheads with their white dhotis, the mechanic's shack with oil marks on the ground, many metal parts for the cars and rickshaws some new some rusty, the nastawalas with waft of spicy bhajiyas and sweet smell of jalebis and their favourite – the golawala's shop on a bike with colourful, sickly sweet syrups in clear bottles and his cool box filled with a big block of ice. Rajdeep licked his lips but not now. Maybe on their way home, he would treat Payal and himself with a Jambu flavour gola each but for now they need to hurry to get to school.

"Hello Rajdeep! Where were you? Why are you so late? You have missed the first part of the school. We were so worried about you?"

Jyotiben, the supervisor was visibly worried at seeing the two children, weary and anxious. She soon composed herself and comforted the two children offering them some water and waited for the explanation.

She knew Rajdeep's family well. She knew his parents were 'contract' workers on local farms, moving constantly wherever there was work. When Rajdeep first enrolled at the Nividya School, their first concern was how they could ensure continuity for their son who so wanted to go to school. Jyotiben also knew that they had resolved to let Rajdeep stay with his maternal uncle who drove a rickshaw and hence could have a permanent home. The only problem was the 8km daily journey to school. They had arranged a rickshaw-taxi to take Rajdeep to school along with Payal when she could join the Balmandir at Nividya.

Rajdeep's parents were not educated themselves but wanted a better future for their son. Is it not what every parent wants? They liked the ethos and vision of Nividya School. The school was providing a high quality learning environment where the staff showed a real understanding and empathy towards the families the Government schools ignored. These families lived hand to mouth doing the most menial jobs or seasonal/contract work where the children were required to earn up to Rs50 per day to add to the sum needed to provide the one meagre meal for the day. The children picked plastic bags and bottles from litter heaps at the edge of residential or industrial areas.

Nividya at its conception took the realities and constraints of these slum children's families into account and hence runs 3 schools in Savarkundla where over 500 children aged 3-9 attend for half a day, six days a week. They start school at 7.30 and finish at 12.30pm. The curriculum is based on active learning through doing and play. They sing, act out, talk and explain their understanding of mathematics confidently. The 'classrooms' have colourful though well used charts and posters and counting equipment for number work. The teaching is embedded in well thought out, structured activities which include reading the daily papers for the older children. There is a value based ethos where the children learn about right and wrong, respect for the many different castes and creeds represented at the school. The children are confident speakers, good listeners, can write and read well and are good at basic mathematics by the time they leave at the end of Year 4.

Most of the majority want to study further.

To encourage the parents to send the children regularly to school, the teachers develop a close relationship with families. They explain the benefits of education for the youngsters and follow up any unexplained absence with a home visit if necessary. After a while, the children develop such an affinity for the school that they themselves push their parents to send them to school. The school provides two sets of school uniform each year and a daily snack of nuts, seeds, and fruit to supplement the poor diet. These families are from the poorest and most deprived class in India often from the scheduled class. These are the neglected peoples who slip through the systems by being entrapped in the vicious poverty cycle.

"Madam, we are sorry to be late today. We missed the bus and the rickshaw did not turn up," Rajdeep said apologetically.

"But how did you get here then?"

"We both walked. We did not want to miss school".

Rajdeep was keen to get to his class and left Jyotiben to wonder at his perseverance and love for learning.



Kiritbhai & Meenaben with Rajdeep and Payal. The children were receiving a photo of them with Babu when they visited Chaparda as part of the 10th anniversary celebrations. These children won a prize of Rp11,000 for their performance and their confidence from a well wisher.



Dr. Kiritbhai Modi, Jyotiben Joshi (school supervisor), Dr Bhaskarbai Banjara (Founder of Nividya Trust), Vikrambhai Mehta (Vice Principal at Chaparda) with some of the children.

Food for thought...

- Would you walk 8 kms to school if your bus did not arrive or the car packed up or mum fell ill and could not take you to school?
- Where have we gone wrong in the UK? Where is the love for learning where education is free and well provided for?

Some background-

The above is based on a true story which my husband and I heard on our visit to the Nividya School in February 2012. This was our second visit to these 3 schools in Savarkundla, Gujarat and we were amazed at what is being achieved despite huge barriers. All children come from the scheduled classes from the slums. The sites are based near the slums so the children can come on their own if the parents are working. The teachers work closely with the families to raise their awareness of health and educational issues. Some of the accommodation is very basic but the charity is working hard to improve it with good success rate. There are 17 teachers many from the scheduled classes themselves; they are trained well. The day to day management is handled effectively by a committed couple who are also trained to teach the Gyan Shala curriculum which has a very similar feel to the way young children are taught through play and real experiences in the UK but with a fraction of the resources when compared to schools in the UK. The schooling is the brain child of Dr Bhaskar and Mrs Suvarna Banjara and they run it under the name of Nividya Trust.

Meena Modi OBE

Meena Modi has a proven record of successful headships in infant and lower schools over the past 16 years. Her leadership and management of her last school has been recognized by Ofsted Inspectors as "Outstanding" with a particular strength in inspiring staff and colleagues to aim high and strive for excellence.

She is an accredited Primary School Improvement Partner with expertise in data analysis, school self-evaluation and strategic planning. She has passion for developing school leaders and parental partnership. Chater Infant school in Watford, Hertfordshire where Meena was the Headteacher from January 2004 to August 2011 was judged to be Outstanding in October 2008.

Meena was awarded an OBE in June 2011 in the Queen's birthday honours list for services to education for her work at Chater Infant School in Hertfordshire.

Dr Kirit Modi is an experienced educationalist. He taught in two secondary schools in this country for over 10 years before moving to local government where he spent over 20 years. He has had extensive experience of working in schools and local authorities at a senior level and has successfully managed change by working closely with schools, elected members and local communities. He has provided strong leadership in turning round a failing Education Department in Islington and establishing a new local education authority in Luton, both as Assistant Director of Education. His passion for tackling disadvantage and promoting equality has resulted in significant cultural changes in the organisations in which he has worked. His most recent achievements have been in leading on the Building Schools for the Future and the Primary Capital Programmes in Islington, winning the BSF bid in Southwark and successfully helping Central Bedfordshire in establishing its Admissions and Capital Programme functions.

Kirit has been Vice-Chair of the Governing Body of Krishna Avanti Primary School and of Canons High School, both in Harrow. He was appointed by the Secretary of State to serve as a member of the General Teaching Council for England. He is currently actively involved in promoting organ donation and transplantation at a national level and works closely with the Department of Health, kidney patients and community groups.

The school is funded through **BEHT**, a registered charity in UK. Please follow this link to find out more about BEHT www.beht.org

If you wish to sponsor a child like Rajdeep, please contact BEHT - Telephone: 020 8428 7287 Email: info@beht.org