



AKASH SINGH/PARIKRMA HUMANITY FOUNDATION

Shukla Bose is surrounded by children who attend one of her four schools in Bangalore, India, supported by the Parikrma Humanity Foundation.

Shukla Bose left a highflying career to educate India's poorest children – from kindergarten through college.

By Priti Salian / Contributor

BANGALORE, INDIA

In midlife, 26 years into a successful business career, Shukla Bose was feeling a big void in her life. “As a child, my mother had instilled in me a feeling of being born for a purpose,” she says. “So while I enjoyed climbing the [corporate] ladder, I kept asking myself: Have I really made a difference in anyone’s life?”

The answer did not satisfy her. “During the course of my career I inspired and mentored people, but that could have been done by plenty of others,” she says.

So in 2003 Ms. Bose left her highflying career, invested her savings, and set out on what has become a soul-satisfying journey by founding the nonprofit Parikrma Humanity Foundation in the southern India metropolis of Bangalore.

She drew on her keen business sense, which she had used to lay the foundation for the time-share vacation industry in India, along with her experience working in the slums of Calcutta as a university student

with Mother Teresa.

Today, Bose’s foundation has a simple goal: Break the cycle of poverty for those living in the slums of Bangalore by educating – from kindergarten through college – at least one child in each family.

Children enrolled at Parikrma are chosen from slum-dwelling families who earn between \$50 and \$85 per month and who could never afford to send their children to school. With its four schools and one junior college (for Grades 11 and 12), Parikrma currently accommodates 1,566 students from 69 slums and four orphanages. It also runs a hostel for girls.

And it stands ready to fund each child’s college education.

“Parikrma aims to give underprivileged children an equal chance at education so they can integrate with kids of private schools, and later with the society,” says Bose during an interview at a Parikrma school. “I want these children to hold high-end jobs at multinational companies and not work at the lower end of the spectrum.”

Parikrma’s alumni are getting there.

Santosh Kumar, a slum-dweller’s son, earned a degree in hotel management and now works as an assistant chef at Hilton International in Bangalore. Thangminlal Hakip, an orphan from Manipur, is a student at one of the country’s best colleges, the National Law School in Bangalore.

Bose’s comprehensive program comes at no cost to parents and includes high-quality education, health care, and nutritious food – meals and snacks for every child. “How can a hungry child focus on studies?” she asks.

A school day at Parikrma begins with breakfast. Lunch is served at 12:30 p.m. and snacks with a high-protein drink at about 3:30 p.m., just before the child leaves school.

“For a lot of our children, it is the last meal of the day,” Bose says.

The school also covers immunization, hospitalization, and even the cost of surgical operations, if needed, for its students.

Parikrma works closely with the students’ families. “Ninety-eight percent of the

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fathers of our students are alcoholic," Bose says matter-of-factly. Parikrma constantly monitors the families and has been able to help many of the men to rehabilitate.

"Several get absorbed in our schools as security personnel, drivers, handymen, support staff, etc., and for others we set up vocational training to help them get jobs," Bose says.

Breakfast at all Parikrma schools is supplied by a team of cooks made up of parents who have gone through the addiction rehabilitation program. Parikrma also runs reading and writing classes for adults, as well as skill-based training such as tailoring and cosmetology courses to help the mothers of students earn a living. Microfinance plans help parents save and borrow money to run a small business, such as selling fruits and vegetables.

Parikrma strives to maintain the dignity of each family. A happy atmosphere is the aim at each Parikrma school.

"There is an atmosphere of love and compassion, and it shows in the behavior of children who feel comfortable, confident, and safe within the school premises," says Maya Holm, a volunteer from Belmont, Mass., who has been part of the Parikrma team since January.

Children bond with their teachers, a rarity among students in India. "They come to us to share their problems and seek solutions," Bose says. "This is because we treat students as our own children. Before solving their problems we always ask a question: What would I have done had my own kid faced this?"

Bose finds it takes about three months for a child who has never been exposed to English to become verbally fluent. Mastering the language is a must for a child to compete at the global level, she says.

Students at Parikrma are competitive with those at some of the best schools in India. Meghashree Balaraju, whose mother works as a domestic helper, scored 90 percent on her exams and was selected for a San Diego Global Youth Leadership Summit to be held this July.

Other Parikrma students have exhibited their artworks at galleries in New York and San Francisco, have won gold medals at a South Asian taekwondo tournament, and have won

How to take action

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Below are groups selected by Universal Giving that help those in need worldwide:

■ **Greenheart Travel** (<http://bit.ly/TravelGreenheart>) is a nonprofit international exchange organization that provides cultural immersion programs that change lives, advance careers, and create leaders. Take action: Volunteer to teach in India (<http://bit.ly/EducateIndia>).

■ **Globe Aware** (<http://bit.ly/GlobeAware>) promotes cultural awareness and sustainability. Take action: Volunteer to work with slum-dwelling children in India (<http://bit.ly/IndiaPoverty>).

■ **One Media Player per Teacher** (<http://bit.ly/OneMediaPlayer>) helps educate the world's poorest billion people using low-cost technology. Take action: Equip a teacher in the developing world with classroom technology (<http://bit.ly/EquipTeacher>).

intercollegiate story-writing competitions conducted at literary festivals.

All the students who have graduated from Parikrma are either attending college, pursuing vocational training, or working and earning money to supplement their family's income.

Parikrma has shattered several myths. "We have discovered that the parents of slum-dwelling kids are as interested in their child's education as any other parent," Bose says.

Most poor parents withdraw their kids from school and put them to work because the education doesn't seem worthwhile. Unfortunately, this happens often in India because most children can only attend government schools, which, while offering free or low-cost schooling, have high teacher absenteeism and deliver

low-quality education.

Statistics from the Indian Ministry of Human Resource Development for 2010-11 show that the school dropout rate was 27 percent at the primary school level and 49.3 percent in secondary schools. At Parikrma, less than 1 percent of the children drop out of school, and the average attendance is 96 percent, among the highest of any school in India, according to Bose.

What does Parikrma do to keep children hooked? "We have a no-textbook and no-examination policy until Class 8, so no rote learning is involved," she says. "Class projects are done in groups, and life skills are integrated into every lesson at Parikrma."

The focus is also on the student-teacher relationships and training teachers to be sensitive to each child's background and problems.

"Bose is inspirational, genuine, and passionate," says Sharat Kaul, senior executive account manager at Synopsys (India) EDA Software Pvt. Ltd., which sponsors a special science program at Parikrma. "Her clear focus is helping her meet the tough challenges at Parikrma."

"Changing the mind-set of the [children's] communities has been a herculean task," Bose says. Parents want their girls to get married soon after school and expect boys to be working by about the same age. "It is difficult convincing them to let their child finish university."

At the same time the environment they live in is fraught with crime. The teachers strive to talk about ethics with every child to keep them from going astray.

The nongovernmental organization runs entirely on sponsorships from corporations and individual donors. It could accommodate more children if more people contributed.

"When we started out, we had to plead with the parents to send their children to school," Bose recalls. "Today, it is traumatic for us to refuse them admission."

However, Bose is hopeful that as Parikrma alumni begin to settle into well-paying jobs, it is only a matter of time before the funding woes will be ameliorated.

■ *For more info, visit <http://www.parikrmafoundation.org/>.*

Next week's difference-maker:

KATHERINE CONNOR gives sanctuary to abused elephants in Thailand, many of which have known only long days of doing their masters' bidding and nights spent in chains.

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Leslie Hawke helps children in Romania get an education.



Sam Bracken aids teens who are leaving foster care.



Estela de Carlotto hunts for 'stolen' grandchildren.

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