

Charity brings light into lives of 700,000 poor Indian children

They are no Bill and Melinda Gates, Microsoft's first couple known for their philanthropy; neither are they fresh-faced non-resident Indians just back to their roots, kitties flush with cash and eager to plough back.

Meet an elite group of 2,600 successful young men and women from the country who are taking social service, the new age Indian corporate mantra, to new heights.

The Round Table India is an umbrella of young, rich and successful Indian professionals and businessmen who are educating at least 700,000 children across the country in a unique project called 'Freedom Through Education'.

'The activities of the organisation, which boasts of members from all the top business families in India, were initially ad hoc. But in 1998, we decided to take up long-term projects that would have an impact socially,' Amit Bansal, project convenor of Round Table India, told IANS. He is the CEO of his own firm, R.R. Associates.

'Our 'Freedom Through Education' project was a hit and has been adopted as national models by the UK and the Netherlands Round Table,' he said. Round Table India is part of the Round Table International founded by Britain-based Rotarian Luis Marchosi in 1950.

The Round Tablers are aged between 18 and 40 years. They contribute through various fund-raising initiatives and personal endeavours. The organisation intends to educate at least one million children by 2010.

Through its member network of businessmen, builders and home product manufacturers, the Round Table India builds schools in rural areas on a build-operate-transfer basis and hands them over to the respective state governments under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

But the organisation retains the right to oversee the quality of education that these institutions offers to students and takes care of the maintenance.

According to the chairman of the Round Table India Area V, Ravi Baid, the organisation has built 1,500 - mostly primary and junior schools - across the country.

The Round Table is spread across 60 nations with 50,000 members. The organisation is divided into 103 zones (areas) and 146 tables in India for activities' sake. Each member on an average spends Rs.75,000, which includes a table subscription of Rs.15,000.

Every Round Tabler supports the education of 260 children across the country, Bansal said.

'We are the only zero overhead service organisation in the world which means that if a member donates Re.1 for social service, the entire money goes for charity. The difference between us and the Gates Foundation is that we do the work hands on, oversee personally and there are no middlemen involved in our projects,' he explained.

Philanthropy in India has a long way to go. On an average, says a study by the South Asian Fund

Raising Group, India raises \$600 million in charities every year, which is insubstantial when compared to the number of millionaires. But that's not the case with the Round Tablers.

The organisation has just tied up with the Britain-based America Online, which has agreed to partner all their education projects in India and given an initial grant of 20,000 euros for four pilot projects.

It has inked pacts with the governments of Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, [Hyderabad](#) and Rajasthan to build more schools.

'We have education projects worth nearly Rs.50-70 million in the pipeline,' Bansal said. The organisation has so far spent Rs.900 million in building 1,500 schools.

Several global charity bids are routed through The Round Table. Last year, a group of students from Harvard wanted to build a school in Mathura for poor children and roped in the Tablers to 'fulfil their dream.'

Abhishekh Singhanian, chairman of the Delhi Friends Round Table, said: 'We built a school on their behalf which now teaches 600 students free of cost. The Harvard Samaritans send \$1,500 to the village panchayat for the school's upkeep through the Round Table.' He is the managing director of JK Technosoft, part of the JK Group of Industries.

However, the latest initiative of the Round Table is art - a medium that Singhanian says is highly saleable and 'has been yielding good money for the cause for the last three years.'

A recent exhibition in Delhi hosted by it in Delhi featured 200 artworks by 120 senior artists. Though the Round Tablers refused to divulge the amount that the exhibition-cum-sale raked in, Bansal said it has added considerably to their last year's kitty of Rs.3 million.

The proceeds have gone to a school for the underprivileged and handicapped Akshay Pratishan, run by Aruba Dalmiya.

The Round Table India is also supporting hunger and orphan rehabilitation projects in Kenya and Darfur, Sudan.

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