

From fortified schools to castles of love

Here's an NGO that reaches out to government schools, finds Lakshmi Sethuraman

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IT IS HEARTENING to know that there are still a few good (wo)men left in this world of ours. Bhagya Rangachar, previously an NRI but settled in Bangalore for the last four years is definitely one of them.

Almost single-handedly, she founded 'Lovecastles', a non-profit, non-government organisation in December 1997 to provide support systems and give a new lease of life to economically backward schools in and around Bangalore City. "I shifted to India after living in the US for over 30 years and it was really disheartening to see the plight of some of the schools here. That's when I thought that the best way to help the children in these schools would be to start an organisation like Lovecastles which caters to their overall growth and enrichment," says Bhagya. Lovecastles helps build a complete support system for the children of these schools. A lot of government schools in Karnataka today lack basic facilities like drinking water and clean toilets. Some have just one single supervisor who functions as the teacher, headmaster and whatever else the school requires. Many other schools combine classes due to lack of space and shortage of teachers.

Lovecastles aims to identify and adopt such schools and work with the School Betterment Committee (which is mandatory for every government school, but typical of government organisations, is inactive in most of the schools) to enhance the quality of education the children studying here receive. "Our aim is not to interfere with the teaching methods that they (the government schools) have adopted. All we want to do is to provide a healthy and enriching educational experience for the children. We provide for after-school tuition, art classes, health awareness pro-



grammes and summer camps which makes life more interesting and informative for the children," says Rangachar. "We have also provided for scholarship funds for students based on their need and performance in school."

Starting with the Basavangudi government school, Lovecastles has now fully adopted four schools — The Little Flower school, the Punnapura government school and the Sampgehalli government school. All the institutions mentioned are situated in economically backward areas. Recognising the high dropout rate of children from such schools, Lovecastles tries to provide them with incentives like mid-day meals to remain in school. "Over 150 children are provided mid-day meals six times a week in all the schools that we have adopted," says Bhagya. "A lot of parents pull out their child from school most-

ly because they cannot afford it. This in one way makes it easier on the parents since one meal a day is provided free for their child." They also try to provide them with an environment conducive for learning by painting dilapidated classrooms and putting up charts and other useful items so that the children enjoy learning. The after-school tuition programme is designed to help children complete their homework and catch up with what they have learnt, since at home it may not be possible for them to do so. "We do not charge the children anything for the services we provide," adds Padma Ramaswamy who has also been an instrumental member of Lovecastles since 1999.

But where do they get their funds? "Well money comes in mostly from volunteers. Some software companies have now started to come forward and help, for example

Aditi Software Company sends us Rs. 5000 every month towards the mid-day meal project. Otherwise, we always help through various other channels, like the people who have so kindly consented to do our web site for us. Even the brochures and other paraphernalia are done by people willing to lend us a hand." Ninety-five per cent of the funds they receive go directly towards the programmes.

The administrative aspect is handled quite impressively by the organisation. "We have never had a dirt of volun... In fact, in every school that we have adopted, we make sure that there is a core volunteer group from the community of the school itself that caters to the various administrative needs. This becomes easier for us to handle because with minimal supervision, we are able to function smoothly," says Bhagya.

The latest ambitious plan of Lovecastles is to build a learning centre in Jakkur that will open a window of opportunities to the 500 and odd rural children living in and around the area. The learning Centre plans to attract children from the 10 schools that are situated around the area. It aims to provide learning through creativity by the conduction of workshops, cultural activities and also by holding computer literacy programmes.

Says a very excited Bhagya "To let these children have access to various resources like computer labs and summer workshops will be really something since most of them have not stepped out of their village surroundings and probably would not have ever seen things like computers and CD-ROMS. This will be a real eye-opener for them."

More organisations like Lovecastles can make this society more committed to a better education system than what prevails.