

Far from the madding crowd

Some 230 kilometres from Kolkata, in West Bengal's Birbhum district, 500 children stand out for their 'unconventional' education

ANJULI BHARGAVA
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He was all of 33 when his friends, acquaintances, colleagues and the wider circle of people around him thought he'd taken leave of his senses. And who really could blame them?

The year was 2009. An IIT-Kharagpur engineer and IIM-Ahmedabad MBA, Arghya Banerjee lived in Chennai with his wife and four-year-old daughter, worked at Irevna — a Standard and Poor's equity research outsourcing company that later got acquired by Crisil — had built a career and reputation in his chosen field and had some savings to get by.

That's when Banerjee decided to chuck it all, return to his native town, Suri in West Bengal's Birbhum district, and start a school. He had no experience in running schools, had no degrees that teachers or school administrators typically acquired, he had no one chasing him to fund his "mad" idea and he really had no one patting his back, saying he was doing something noble.

What he did have was the support of his wife, a young daughter who could benefit in the bargain and a belief that education could be more than what he, she and several hundred million students in India receive. Irevna — which he co-headed by the end of his stint — had grown from 5 to 500 people before his eyes and what he had noticed was that education failed to equip most with the skills needed to succeed. "Logical thinking and the ability to solve everyday problems were often missing; stuff one needs to learn in school was not to be found even in those with post graduate degrees," says he.

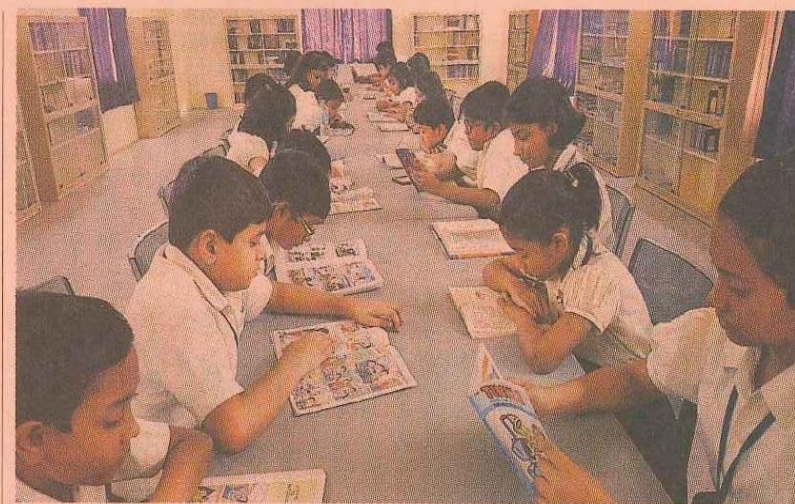
As is to be expected, everyone who encountered Banerjee and his plans was sceptical to begin with; many asking whether he had been fired from his job in Chennai. Some dismissed Banerjee as a nutcase or a madman but he has both his alma mater and his professional achievements to dispel any such notions. He studied at a local government school for his formative years; yet he managed a state position in the JEE examination without coaching! He couldn't be as crazy as it appears.

And it all does appear rather crazy. Located in 2.5 acres, the 500-odd students at Levelfield — four and a half hours away from Kolkata — do none of the normal stuff. There are hardly any text books, no regular notes taken from black boards, no teachers dictating stuff ad nosium — most of what you are used to seeing in traditional schools is missing. Children in the classroom are encouraged to talk, discuss and argue and to think for themselves.

Class I and II students converse fluently in English, read and write it. This despite the fact that almost none of the parents speak the language and neither do any of their relatives or peers studying at other local schools.

Even with math, the approach is not to focus on only standard word problems but also Japanese puzzles, Sudoku and so on — a lot of this is done through apps developed especially for the students (not downloaded but developed). Tablets are provided in school itself that students use.

The first year or so — after he bought land and started building the school using his own savings — was spent developing unique content that simplifies even the most complex stories and thoughts to be



understood by four to seven year olds. As the children read a novel, they also filled in blanks, the focus always being on the why, what, how, where and when of things — not on cramming and rote.

But by the time the students reach Class VII-VIII, they are no longer absorbing simplified texts as their reading skills are advanced enough to proceed to original texts. So students in Class VIII don't think that Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a book aimed at cultivating a love for animals, they know and why Gulliver went on his travels and what it led to, they read and discuss books like *Shawshank Redemption*, *Macbeth* and *Teacher Man*. Films are shown through the year and discussed at length. Grade VIII students watch *Gandhi*, *Judgement at Nuremberg*, *Hotel Rwanda*, *the Pianist* and *Inherit the Wind*. History and movements like genocide are introduced through them. "The idea is to bring alive stuff and to do it in an

engaging manner," explains Banerjee, saying that almost none of his students aspire to become doctors or engineers. It is the arts and social sciences that typically draw them due to the focus on reading, literature and history. Grade IX students are studying "Sapiens" a book many adults would struggle with.

The school has created its own graded-reading softwares, graded-math software (Delta), and as many as 12 Android apps so that the teaching methods are uniform and can be deployed elsewhere as well, "by other idealistic entrepreneurs interested in true learning," says Banerjee.

Parents, too, were sceptical at the start. In the first year, the school took in around 70 children in the age group of 4-6 years. But after the first year, parents began to see the changes in their own children. Children could speak fluently, their behaviour and manners showed improvement. "Often parents said that children would

translate news or happenings for them — from TV news or newspapers".

Sneha Ghosh whose son is in Upper KG says she has the option of putting him in a Kolkata school but chooses this over all because the "world is changing and in today's world, children will need to be able to think". She also says that she finds most parents — across schools — unhappy with their schools whereas the parents at Levelfield "love the school the more they discover it".

Swati Mukhopadhyay's son has been in the school since he was four and she says they chose the school because it was "different". When she compares with other children, she feels her son is learning to think and question — as against the rote education she herself received. She says she's very satisfied with how he is turning out so far.

Parent endorsement has meant that now for 50 seats, Levelfield gets around 200 applications and several calls from local big-wigs seeking admission for their kith and kin, even though it is one of the more expensive schools in the area. Fees for students in lower classes are around ₹25,000 a year and go up to ₹60,000 for senior classes. Typical budget schools charge ₹500-800 a month; government schools are free. The average income of the parent community is around ₹6 lakh a year and comprises government officials, local businessmen and government school teachers who prefer putting their own wards in this school rather than their own.

Teachers (the school has 15 at present) are between 23-30 years and are the highest paid in West Bengal. A starting teacher earns around ₹28,000 a month; with some

experience it is around ₹40,000. Teachers are only hired if they don't have a "B-Ed" degree and have no previous experience in teaching. "Teachers we hire are not looking at this as a profession of last resort. They are in fact not even looking at teaching till they find us — through Facebook or word of mouth", explains Banerjee. A teacher typically teaches his class all subjects, an approach many question. Banerjee says that expectations from teachers today are very low. "If we expect students to learn all subjects, why can't a teacher teach all subjects", he adds.

What in the long run is Banerjee hoping to do though? Is he only looking at running one school? 500-600 students in a country of this size is just a drop in the ocean. "I would like to spread this system of education elsewhere. I can't do it through more schools as this one keeps my hands full but I'd like to bring about a change in the way things have been done so far, maybe by spreading the message," says Banerjee. He'd be happy to share his curriculum and pedagogy with anyone who wants to do things differently.

Vikas Jhunjhunwala, who spent some years in the social enterprise space and is now CEO of Sunrise schools in Delhi, visited Levelfield before he set up his own school, says that Levelfield is questioning all the conventional thinking — both in terms of curriculum and pedagogy and that too in a location that he thinks is "back of beyond". But he thinks it may be hard to scale up with a model like this as attracting good talent in terms of human resources will always be a big challenge.

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