

A hangout with a difference

CLT India, an NGO that promotes innovative learning with technology as an enabler, is the new hangout of children from various villages around Jakkur after their school hours. Marianne de Nazareth reports.



The building is large and airy and filled with colour flashing on sleek black plasma-screen monitors. They are the most modern, up-to-date Intel Pentium PC's with 10 to 18-year-old kids expertly handling Flash, adobe and photoshop programmes. No, this is not an international school on the outskirts of the city with its well heeled students working in their computer lab. It is CLT India (Children's Lovecastles Trust), an NGO begun ten years ago by Bhagya Rangachar. The kids here are from 10 different villages around Jakkur, spending their Saturday afternoon at the CLT

Learning Center - an after-school program. "CLT is not a school, but an institution that builds a support system to the children in many government schools," explains Bhagya.

Ten years ago, she came back from the US on a holiday and never went back! Her involvement with CLT and its evolvement from just a mid-day meal scheme to a complete support system is laudable. How many women would have given up a cushy job in the US to come back to India to make a difference to thousands of children's lives in under-served communities?

"Eight years ago, that was the fist building constructed here, on the Jakkur school premises," explains Bhagya, pointing out to it. "It holds the computer lab, the science lab and the library. Teachers of government schools get trained to use ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools to enhance their teaching skills and to teach more effectively. We are not replacing, but strengthening the learning environment with another layer of support system. In fact, we have built our main model for Teachers' Resource Centre and Children's Learning Centre on the school grounds so that the village kids from Jakkur school can have easy access to come here during and after school hours."

In this building surrounded with the peace and quiet of the village, a group of professionals are creating multi-media educational content. "Our first package that we bought from a vendor was very expensive and not easy to scale as we adopted many more schools. So, we decided to do our own content in both English and Kannada that is affordable and accessible to all," explains Bhagya. "These specialists are transforming state syllabus texts into vibrant multi-media content using local images, local context that the children can relate to." I was shown a presentation on Latitude and Longitude done by the CLT team, where graphics and animation turned an otherwise boring topic into something the kids could connect with and quickly assimilate. "This content is getting ready to go into many government schools across Karnataka under the "e-paataashale" banner," explained Bhagya.

Walking back up to their After-School Learning Centre - Computer Clubhouse, beside the computers, is the music lab. Here children have the newest rock music blasting while they try out their latest Hritik Roshan moves.

"This is the lab where they can write their own music and compose their own songs," explains Amith, the clubhouse co-ordinator. And while we watch young Bhima show off his Michael Jackson moon dance moves, I get to meet Asiya who is just back from a trip to Boston with two other girls, Padma and Manjula from Jakkur as part of the Teen Summit where 300 kids from across the world participated. It's pretty obvious that the project is exceedingly successful in shoring up the kids' confidence levels. CLT proudly hosts the only Computer Clubhouse in India in partnership with MIT Media Lab and the Boston Museum of Science and Intel Foundation, that attracts kids during after-school hours and inspires them to harness their own potential.

As you can see, it is a self-directed, peer-peer learning model with no teachers, but facilitated by mentors. They are networked with 100 such clubhouses globally - from Asia Pacific countries to Ireland, to South Africa, Jordan to Brazil and so on. "And that is how three of our girls went to Boston recently and attended the World Teen Summit for Technology-inspired projects," she explains. "We also have volunteers from the spheres of theatre and art, as well as from IT companies."

So how do you fund this place is the question uppermost in my mind.

"I connect with corporate houses and some of the funding is earmarked for specific projects, while most of our funding comes from CSR or Corporate Social Responsibility. Volunteers from large

corporate houses come and give their time and their volunteer hours are matched by grants by their Foundations. Our volunteers' programs are very innovative, where they have painted many government schools, built close to 100 rain water harvesting tanks around Devanahalli, taught kids and have taken them on field trips! This is a 3-way-win situation, where the community gains; money earned is ploughed back into CLT's educational programs and the corporate volunteers get the opportunity to connect with the communities around them."

The affordability of CLT 's e-Paatashale content repository for State board schools has made it highly accessible for common people and CLT seeks partnerships to increase its reach!

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