

Educating Rita

Joy Srinivasan empowers the children of slum and construction site workers with education and opportunities, reports **Malathi Nayak**

JOY Srinivasan has great faith in the untapped potential of economically disadvantaged children. After forging ahead with the determination to become the first graduate in her family, she felt a strong urge to empower others to use education, opportunities and exposure to integrate themselves into the mainstream. This vision has translated into the formation of Makkala Jagriti.

Meaning 'children's awakening' in Kannada, Makkala Jagriti currently runs four Community Learning Centres for children in Bangalore; three for children from slum communities and one for the children of construction-site workers. Each centre provides learning programmes and opportunities in an environment that ensures acceptance and inclusion to help children recognise their hidden potential.

As Joy explained, "The goal is to help them become role models in their homes, thus creating waves of change in the vulnerable communities they hail from."

THE UPHILL CLIMB

"Each vulnerable community has different dynamics," Joy explains. "One has to understand the pulse, the politics and the values at play. Parents are often afraid of hidden agendas and that the leaders of the political factions in the slums may feel threatened. Inclusion, secularism and equality within Makkala Jagriti



Joy Srinivasan (centre-back) at the Makkala Jagriti Learning Centre in Bangalore

gradually help the community realise that the centre belongs to them," she adds.

The biggest challenge is to facilitate the shift to new values. This entails weeding out years of mental conditioning and slowly yields positive results. As Joy explains, many street kids who were into petty theft now understand the consequence of their actions. The habit of parents beating their children ruthlessly is making way for mature negotiation. Joy, with a professional background in behavioural science, conducts experimental learning workshops for parents, helping them reflect on themselves, their role as parents, and other issues.

WALKING THE TIGHT ROPE

"My husband and my five-and-a-half-year-old son have been extremely supportive," Joy reveals. "But it hasn't been easy. My son Vaishanth once demanded that I shut down the centres. He now understands that his mother takes care of many other children too."

EMPOWERING WOMEN

Joy mentors enthusiastic young mothers who accompany their children to the centres, many of whom join as salaried employees. "Vanitha, a staff member from the community, read out the vote of thanks in English at our Annual Day in front of 500 people, which boosted not only her own self esteem but infused confidence in other women too. Another mother who has great hope for her son is Jyotimani — she takes a half-day off, jeopardising her job as a maid servant, to attend the parents' meeting and partake in her son's progress," she says with a smile.

Joy Srinivasan is walking against the currents that thwart social progress and urging others to do the same. Makkala Jagriti is in the process of rebuilding communities and empowering its members to lead the way in initiating an awakening not only in their lives but also those of many others in their communities, undoubtedly lending life to the belief that an individual's liberation is connected with the liberation of others. **IN**

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