

**A report about AID JeevanSaathi Balaji Sampath appeared in Outlook India, September 18, 2006. The full-text of the article is reproduced below.**

Balaji Sampath: IIT-Madras grad, PhD from the US, this electronics engineer chose to work with govt school kids in TN

**An enlightened corps of techies is ditching hi-profile jobs to return to school, testing their logic, rigour and yen for quality at the grassroots**

The Class 5 student knew that the difference between the earth's equatorial circumference and its polar circumference was 72 km. It was, after all, the answer to a popular exam question, and she had simply memorised it. But she had no idea what 'equatorial' or 'polar' meant—or even plain 'circumference'.

But IIM-Ahmedabad alumna and former Tata IBM employee Sridhar Rajagopalan and his two colleagues knew what the gaps in her learning meant—a business opportunity and the chance to make an impact in their new career area: education. In five years, their company Educational Initiatives has administered asset, a set of diagnostic tests they have developed to probe how far schoolchildren are learning concepts rather than just parroting them, to over 1,00,000 students. Business from private schools makes their start-up profitable, but 40 per cent of their work is now done with rural government schools, at a subsidised rate.

It was also five years ago that Aditya Natraj, an MBA from the prestigious French management school, INSEAD, and a chartered accountant with seven years' corporate experience, offered his services to education NGO Pratham, which focuses on improving learning outcomes in government schools.

Recruited to run Pratham's operations in Gujarat, he manages a team of 300 full-time staff and 3,000 volunteers that provides learning support to about 30,000 government schoolchildren in the state.

Meanwhile, Dehradun boy Himanshu Joshi achieved his dream, making it to IIM-Ahmedabad after three years in manufacturing on a factory shop floor. After his MBA, he rejoined his employer, Glaxo SmithKline, in a new role, with a new package. But six months ago, the 29-year-old quit finessing strategies to sell Horlicks Lite, and took a 30 per cent salary cut to join iDiscoveri, a Delhi-based educational services company started by former corporate professionals. His new baby: the launch of an innovative teacher training programme, which, he declares with infectious confidence, "will be a model of excellence for the country".



Aditya Natraj : CA, MBA, Insead, worked for Big 4 firm KPMG. Now heads education NGO Pratham's ops in Gujarat.

And in Chennai, Balaji Sampath, an IIT graduate with a doctorate in electrical engineering from the US, who runs AID India, an NGO that carries out science teaching and primary school programmes in 350 government schools in Tamil Nadu, finds other engineers are keen to join his project. Starting out as volunteers, hardware engineer Chandra Anil, 32; software engineer Smita Kalyani, 25; and Ravi Shankar, 31, an ex-IITian with a doctorate in computer and electronic engineering and who once worked for IBM in the US, now work with him full-time.

The point of these examples is that a significant number of 'techies' and 'corporate types', many with blue-chip names on their CVs, are going down this road—not at retirement age, but during their most productive professional years. For most, there are financial costs involved—from the risks inherent in a new venture to taking a salary cut. Even if large NGOs like Pratham pay their top staff Rs 60,000 per month, it is still a fraction of what their corporate counterparts earn. Smaller NGOs, like AID India, pay far less.

It's not an entirely new phenomenon; education has always had drawing power for "outsiders"—in the '70s, there were the physicists, engineers and others who came together under the banner of education NGO Eklavya. Madhav Chavan, one of Pratham's founders, was a chemistry professor until the mid-'80s. IIT and MIT-trained engineer Lalit Pande also turned to education in the mid-'80s.

But remarkable though these actions were, it was also a different time.

Engineering and management colleges were not 'brands', parents weren't blowing up their savings on coaching classes, MBAs weren't being wooed with seven-figure starting salaries, and people who worked in the social sector were not dismissed as "jholawalas". Today, it's perhaps even more at odds with an increasingly right-wing public culture for bright, ambitious, young people to want to spend their working lives on giving 200 million shortchanged Indian school children a better educational deal.

So, why are they doing it? This is social commitment defined by a strong dash of individualism. "A sense of adventure, and a desire for recognition, the need to be something more than a small fish in a corporate pond," says Rukmini Banerji of Pratham, herself a PhD in economics. "These are also people wanting to make an impact, to use their skills to improve what they see around them."



Sridhar Rajagopalan: BTech from IIT-Madras, MBA from IIM-A, worked for Tata IBM. Now tests learning outcomes among schoolchildren.

They are also, often, people who have nursed ambitions to work "in development" while reflexively sitting for exams, and then measuring out their lives in software projects or corporate targets, to meet the expectations of middle-class families. Or professionals chafing at the rigid structures of corporate life. In six months, says Joshi, he has been coining slogans, sticking posters on walls, liaising with government, meeting teachers and principals, interacting with cutting-edge educators—a range of activities that did not come his way before. "You have a freedom to experiment—and a chance to learn by failing."

Says Gurumurthy Kasinathan, 38, who worked for consultancy giant A.F. Ferguson and software company i-Flex Solutions before moving to the Azim Premji Foundation (APF), which has deputed him to help the Karnataka education department revamp its programmes, "A staff of two lakh, 32 districts, 202 blocks, 2,200 villages, 45,000 schools. No corporate job can give you this size, this scale, this complexity and these multiple levels of expectations."

But why education? "With anything else, you're tackling symptoms, not the disease. With education, you're tackling the root of the problem," says Rajagopalan. "There are fewer conflicts of interests, compared to other areas, vested interests are marginal," points out Pratham's Chavan. "You can see change happening on the ground," says Sampath.

"I don't want to stand on a high horse and say, I'm doing something for my country," says Natraj. "You can do that by working in telecom. I'm here because creating high-quality education systems on a large scale is a challenge that excites me."

Two trends in the last decade have also made education attractive to "crossovers": One, a gradual shift of focus from increasing enrolment in schools, to tackling appallingly low levels of learning, one of the causes of extremely high dropout rates. That gives NGOs or ventures like Educational Initiatives greater opportunities to contribute, and makes government more receptive to their contributions (though the relationship can also be fraught with contradictions).

As Sampath points out, "Enrolment in schools in Tamil Nadu is 98 per cent, but the government can't deliver on quality. Fifty per cent of the children can't read. A Class 12 student from a private school who takes IIT coaching knows more maths and science than an MSc from a government school background."

The second trend is more funding for NGOs working in education, thanks to CSR (corporate social responsibility) funds, diaspora money and government grants; and the rise of big education NGOs, among them Pratham, the Naandi Foundation and APF, with multi-crore budgets, and a capacity to work on a scale that excites challenge-seekers. Some, like Naandi CEO Manoj Kumar, are more than keen to attract corporate professionals. "Why are some of the best minds in the country selling soaps and shampoos?" he asks. Good question.