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Indefatigable children's champion



Rao: dream turned reality

A champion of underprivileged children and fundraiser extraordinaire, Popuri Poornachandra Rao is founder-secretary of the Guntur (Andhra Pradesh)-based NICE (Needy Illiterate Children Education, estb.2002) Society, which runs a free-of-charge residential English-medium school in Guntur for 151 boys, 70 percent of whom are orphans. In June 2010, NICE promoted a similar girls school with an investment of Rs.50 lakh.

**Newspeg.** In the financial year 2010-2011, despite recessionary global conditions, NICE raised Rs.73 lakh from child-friendly donors in India and abroad — the society's largest annual collection ever — to fund its extraordinary schooling initiatives.

**History.** Rao registered NICE in 2002 with an initial investment of Rs.85,000 sourced from his personal savings and sale of his ancestral home in Bollapalli village, Andhra Pradesh. "Born into a poor family and having lost my father at a young age, I had to depend on the generosity of village elders to complete my education. The hardships faced by my mother made a lasting impact on me. Although promoting a free school for orphans was a life-long dream, it became reality only after working for 12 years and saving the amount required to fund the school," recalls Rao, who served with several Hyderabad-based comp-anies including Seven Pharmaceuticals Ltd and Lokesh Mechanics before converting to his noble calling at age 33.

Over the past decade, the NICE School for Boys has grown from a 400 sq. ft building housing ten children to a 20,000 sq. ft English-medium boarding school with an enrolment of 151 class V-XII boys mentored by 20 qualified teaching and non-teaching staff. Currently, the school comprises ten classrooms, a library with 2,500 volumes, science and maths labs and a sports ground, apart from separate hostels for 27 girls and 151 boys.

In the recently concluded fiscal year, Rao single-handedly raised Rs.35 lakh from corporates; Rs.14 lakh from NRIs and Rs.24 lakh from resident Indians. "To raise this sum, I visited 4,500 individuals and travelled over 30,000 km by scooter within Andhra Pradesh, and 25,000 km by train and bus," says Rao, who works as honorary secretary of the NICE Society, earning his sub-sistence from a part-time job with Hyderabad-based Acers Engineers Ltd.

**Direct speech.** "My life's ambition is to make quality English-medium education available to disadvantaged, especially orphaned children, to ready them for higher education and employment as state government schools are severely deficient in this respect and suffer chronic teacher absenteeism. Currently, our students write the school leaving exam of the National Institute of Open Schooling, but before the academic year begins next June, we will receive CBSE affiliation," says Rao, an English literature graduate of Nagarjuna University, Andhra Pradesh.

**Future plans.** For the current fiscal year, Rao has set a target of raising Rs.60-70 lakh. "Both our schools are set to expand continuously and by 2015, we expect to have an aggregate enrolment of 1,000 boys and girls. Even so, the demand from underprivileged children is many multiples of this number. I am determined to do my best to transform them into well-educated contributing citizens," says this indefatigable children's champion.

The Force be with you!

Swati Roy (Bangalore)

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