

SITTING in a tiny modest office at Kalwa, near Thane, the man at the helm of it all greets us with a warm smile and simple demeanour, taking us through REAP's inspirational journey. REAP, also known by many as 'footpath university,' has, over the years, been silently and quietly educating child labourers, rag-pickers, slum and tribal children through its informal schools, with the motive of bringing about social transformation through education, entitlement (of human rights), employment and empowerment (of women).

Seeing scores of children missing out of school and urchins and rag-pickers dotting the city, Father Uncle, as he is fondly called, was moved to begin REAP, realizing that the street was not where young children deserved to be. "Beginning with a group of volunteers, today, REAP successfully runs Balwadis, conducts bridge courses to help students who have dropped out of studies get back into

working."

Miranda divulges that he has finally found his 'calling'. Through REAP, he has created a successful replicable system which is not only unique and innovative but also strongly relies on people's participation, involvement and team work. Beginning with a survey of an area and presenting statistics of the children living there to the locals, REAP has relied on their participation, providing services in tandem with their needs and requirements. "We have always encouraged people's participation and locals to put in efforts. We have never imposed on them. REAP relies on the locals to provide locations to conduct classes, and some of these have ranged from temples, offices or even homes. Keeping children interested and focussed in studies is a



Pics: Sushil Kadam | ADC

What started off in 1998 as a small campaign, has, since its inception, only grown larger and larger, and has been single-handedly responsible for providing free education to more than 1 lakh children. These are children not only from Mumbai, but those living on the outskirts of the metropolis as well, right up to Khardi. Initiated solely with the intention of providing children with what they rightfully deserve, Reach Education Action Programme a.k.a REAP has managed to reach out to the poorest of the poor and has taken literacy to their doorsteps. Gayatri Sahasrabudhe had an enlightening interaction with Jesuit priest Dr. Trevor Miranda, Director, REAP, who shared his vision for upliftment of the underprivileged.

As you sow, so shall you REAP



EMPOWERING THROUGH EDUCATION: Father Trevor Miranda (Right) standing tall and proud amidst his little proteges, and (Below) setting them on the path to literacy and success.

mainstream schooling, offers supplementary courses to strengthen their foundation, networks with zilla parishad schools to enhance the quality of education being provided there, runs boarding schools, provides teacher training to those who intend to take up teaching—the backbone of the movement, skill training through short term courses in computers, home-nursing and conversational English. It is also involved in initiatives for women's empowerment with the aim of making them agents of social change, through adult literacy, awareness programmes, income-generation and self-help groups."

The mantra behind it all being, as Miranda states, "Every child must be in school, learning well and not



core objective owing to the unconventional class conditions and the fact that many are drop-outs. Our teachers are trained with three essential qualities, they should wear ghunghroos to play, sing and dance with the children; be jovial and always have a smile on their face and to have love in their hearts."

Today with more than 250 literacy centres and 10,000 learners each year, REAP is bringing about change and empowering the lives and families it touches. The road hasn't been easy but has surely been incredibly enriching. From convincing parents to send their children to school, getting funds and dealing with wary people and suspicious minds, Miranda ascertains, "It has been a fantastic journey and a great

learning experience. If the road had not been difficult, it would have meant that we are not making an impact and something would have been wrong." And while there were plenty of moments of frustration he recalls small incidents from meeting former students to winning the \$ 1 million Opus prize for outstanding humanitarian work as well as an Honorary Doctorate in 2005 or the time when a child asked him if he was God, that reinstated his faith, passion and fire for the cause.

So, while Miranda states

that he still has a long way to go, on a parting note he comments about government initiatives, "We welcomed the RTE but they have omitted children between the age of 0 and 6 which are important foundation years of a child. Even if there is 25% reservation in schools, there is not much said about the quality of education of the 97% that go to government schools. The government needs to work with NGOs closely and needs to have concrete roadmaps." As we sign off and take his leave we can't help but salute this unsung hero.

Mrinal Kulkarni
Actor and Director



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