



## What started at a fun-filled gathering of old students is changing the lives of thousands of little girls—and the very fabric of rural India

Last year, when 11-year-old Rubina Bano finished her fifth standard at a primary school set in a thatched mud house near a community well in Mahuakhurd, a village in Rajasthan's Alwar district, she topped her class and delighted her father, a vegetable seller. Meanwhile, Rubina's completing her primary education was one more feather in the cap for a handful

of people who are unrelated to her: 59-year-old Gurgaon businessman Anil Tandon and a small group of fellow IIM Ahmedabad graduates, all from the class of 1978.

"When I grow up, I want to become a teacher," says Rubina. That's the kind of new-found aspirations expressed by about 17,000 little girls like her from as many as 560 locations in rural

India, whose lives Tandon and his classmates have touched through IIMPACT, a charitable trust they set up just eight years ago.

It all began at a fun-filled alumni meeting in December 2002. Amid the backslapping and nostalgia, the three-day reunion proved to be different for several people from that class of 1978. "We've all achieved so much," Anil Tandon told his classmates. "Now it's our turn to give something back to society." That led to a discussion on the meeting's last day, when a group of about 20 from the 100 or so alumni gathered there began to ideate.

Back home, Tandon and his classmate Biswajit Sen, who had helped establish several NGOs, e-mailed about 50 of their fellow IIM alumni, exhorting them to take up a social cause. They got some replies and so, in February 2003, nine of them met at a Gurgaon club. There Krishan Dhawan, the current president of IIMPACT, quoted the Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen, who considers female literacy a true indicator and enabler of development. "That's when IIMPACT's focus took shape," explains Tandon.

For countless underprivileged girls in rural India, education is among the last things their folks care about. The daily lives of these children revolve around performing household chores or attending to their livestock. Many of them get married without learning to read, but thanks to IIMPACT, Rubina and

thousands of others now have a fair chance of escaping such a bleak future.

Visiting remote Rajasthani villages, where Biswajit Sen knew of Ibtada, an NGO that promotes literacy among children, the friends who formed IIMPACT decided to open 20 primary schools—or "learning centres"—in the villages of Alwar. Every centre was to have a teacher and about 30 girl students. They would be run at low cost with locally available resources—a practical approach—yet provide quality primary education to girls.

The cost of running 20 centres worked out to about ₹12 lakhs annually. Since the money had to come year after year, they wondered how they'd fund it. They'd seek sponsors, and friends would chip in. But what if they'd have to shut shop for lack of funds? That's when Tandon's business partner, Gautam Nair, made an offer: If they failed to find enough sponsors, any shortfall would be covered from their own business earnings. Tandon agreed.

By the end of 2003, the first 20 learning centres had been established in premises made available by village panchayats, thanks to help from Ibtada. "It was tough convincing some village elders to give us a place," recalls Nirmala Tandon, Anil's wife, who quit her teaching job at a Delhi school to volunteer fulltime. "They were suspicious and



**The friends meet for IIMPACT business. President Dhawan (standing, second from right), Nirmala (seated, on right), Biswajit Sen (standing, third from left).**

wondered why we city folk would want to teach their girls for free.”

In Alwar's predominantly Muslim population, many parents were opposed to the idea of sending their daughters, especially if they were already attending a religious *madrassa*. “So we asked the parents to sit in the classrooms to experience firsthand what we teach,” says Nirmala. “Some of them did and, gradually, their opposition faded.”

One group that still felt threatened by IIMPACT's learning centres comprised the maulvis who taught at the madrassas. Within two years of their opening, six Alwar centres had to be closed due to their stiff opposition. But not for long—it was the mothers of the children who insisted they wanted their girls to go back. “Soon,” says Anil Tandon,

“all six centres reopened.”

In 2006, IIMPACT started expanding to other states where literacy and primary-school facilities were most deficient. Using an operating model developed by IIMPACT—it has training, learning and teaching methodology and materials—local grassroots NGOs were engaged to operate more learning centres in the various regions.

“We created a child-friendly system where teaching methods are interesting, with no emphasis on rote learning,” says Biswajit Sen. “No books are given to the girls at the preliminary stage, when they are taught the alphabet and numerals with the help of printed cards.”

“IIMPACT lays stress on a child-centred education,” explains Nirmala Tandon. “Every child is appreciated regularly. It may be at the morning assembly, where a girl is able to express herself freely. It may be for art, craft and stories for creativity and expression. There's

abacus, pebbles and sticks for mental stimulation, singing and dancing for joyful experiences—all these are key to our program.”

Everywhere, finding teachers was another hurdle. So they decided not to limit their search by looking for graduates. “Anyone who's passed the 12th standard and has a real interest in teaching is considered,” says Krishan Dhawan. “After our training, such teachers are often better suited to the needs of our students.”

“We also train our teachers to be cheerful in class,” adds Nirmala.

**T**he average annual cost of running a centre is relatively low at ₹75,000, or ₹2500 per child. Today each IIMPACT learning centre is adopted by a sponsor, many of whom have direct links and access to the centre they adopt.

“An educated girl makes a big difference,” explains Ravi Kumar, 21, the teacher at one centre in Moreda village, Rajasthan. “Not only does she become aware of the importance of nutrition, cleanliness and health, she also takes along productive ideas to the family she gets married into.” In other words, the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.

Indeed, some girls are themselves discovering IIMPACT. Sushama Malik belongs to a very poor agricultural family in Orissa's Gajapati district. Through her playmates, she came to know about a nearby IIMPACT learning centre and told

her parents that she wanted to enrol there. She's ten years old, but only in standard two now. Yet, had it not been for IIMPACT, she'd never have gone to school. “When I grow up,” says the confident, bright-eyed girl, echoing Rubina Bano who lives a thousand kilometres away, “I want to be an *anganwadi* teacher.”

**E**ight years on, an idea that took shape at just another alumni meeting now spreads its learning centres across seven states—Rajasthan, UP, Bihar, Haryana, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal. “From the current 560, we plan to increase the number of centres to 2000 over the next three years,” says IIMPACT president Krishan Dhawan, “and that should help educate 60,000 girls. All this has been made possible by the contributions of a number of IIM alumni, some of whom, like Abhay Borwankar of Pune and Rahul Tandon of Bangalore, have been involved since inception.”

What does Anil Tandon have to say about the impact of his idea? “I wanted to give back to society, had no idea of how or what, but I got the answer,” he smiles. “It helps as always to get like-minded people together and take up a cause that's close to your heart.”

*The Editors*, with reporting by Aditya Sharma in Rajasthan

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