

Back to school

In a unique project in Kerala, a government school becomes a world-class institution



When Oscar laureate A.R. Rahman flew down to Kozhikode recently, it was not for a music programme but to see the amazing transformation brought about in a government school.

In a programme masterminded by school authorities under the guidance of the local MLA, the -120year-old Government Vocational Higher Secondary School for Girls in Nadakav, which mostly teaches children from society's weaker sections, has been upgraded to international standards.

In the spacious new auditorium, Rahman recalled how he met old friends K.E. Faizal and wife Shabana in New York where they told him about how the Faizal-Shabana Foundation had spent Rs. 15 crore on a school project in Kerala. That's when Rahman decided he wanted to visit the school and see for himself the transformation.

Kerala's achievements in the education sector, particularly in democratising it, have been remarkable. Its success in bringing education within the reach of the poorest children has made its literacy rate among the highest in the country. And now, this unique collaboration between MLA Pradeep Kumar and a private foundation has emerged as another development model for education in the country.

What was once just another government school now boasts of facilities unheard of in similar schools — an astro-turf playground, super-smart classrooms, computers, and a state-of-the-art science lab, among other facilities. Pradeep Kumar, the CPI (M) MLA for Kozhikode, says his mission was to have a world-class school that would still be affordable to ordinary people. The state's Planning Board came up with a project titled Promoting Regional Schools to International Standards through Multiple Interventions or PRISM.

World-class it certainly is. Infosys provided 150 computers, and ISRO gave a high-tech science lab. From the government and the MLA's local area development fund came Rs. 7 crore. For the rest, NRI tycoon Faizal and Shabana stepped in with Rs. 15 crore from the Faizal-Shabana Foundation. The plan was provided by Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode (IIMK). Rahman, obviously impressed by what he saw, has announced the support of Rahman Foundation in Chennai for a music school that he immediately inaugurated. Interestingly, the school's facilities are open to the people of the neighbourhood.

The school is a superb example of government-private participation in the education sector, and a rare instance where bitter political foes — the Congress-led United Democratic Front and the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front — played equally productive roles. The project was initiated by Pradeep Kumar when the LDF government was in power and it was completed under the UDF government.

The Nadakav school is a promising chapter in the attempt to resist the commercialisation of education that threatens to make high-class education unaffordable to everybody but the very rich. It is also a heartening attempt to lift the sagging image of government schools and make them more attractive to students who are migrating in large numbers to private schools that boast of attractive infrastructure and ambience. It has often been noted that better infrastructure and facilities could improve both morale and quality of education in government schools.

Meanwhile, Pradeep Kumar has turned his attention to two other government schools in his constituency, but finding benevolent sponsors is not easy. Work has begun in the Government Higher Secondary School of Karaparamba with a small allocation from the MLA's local area development fund, and the search is on for other funds to complete the work.

At a time when education standards are falling appallingly across the country, this unique public-private model might be just the shot in the arm that government schools need.