

UAE-based couple to refurbish 100 government schools in India



On eve of India's Independence Day, businessman and his wife pledge to change the face of primary education

Dubai: Refurbishing 100 Indian government schools — including revamping buildings and training teachers — has become the mission of a Dubai-based businessman, Faizal Kottikollon, and his wife, Shabana, on the eve of India's independence day celebrations this week.

The project titled Mission 100 at the cost of Dh600 million is being done under the aegis of a rare public-private partnership project spearheaded jointly by the government of Kerala and the Kottikollon's charity organisation – the Faizal and Shabana Foundation.

Government schools were chosen because the Kottikollons believe that their efforts can help nearly 90 per cent of the student community in Kerala that is currently studying in government schools. With an average of 2,500 pupils in each school, Mission 100 aims to benefit nearly 250,000 pupils in Kerala.

Kottikollon, who is also the chairman of a construction company, KEF Holdings, Dubai, told Gulf News he wanted to give back to his country and felt that education was the field where he could do work.

“I strongly believe that education is the right of each and every human being and that the foundation needs to be set at a young age, at the primary level. So, early last year, when I heard about the unique PRISM [Promoting Regional Schools to International Standards] concept initiated by MLA Pradeep Kumar, in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Kozhikode, it immediately struck a chord. I spent time understanding the model and the intended outcomes. When my wife Shabana and I went to see the school and its infrastructure, we were shocked. There were hardly any toilets, the dining hall was barely more than a shed and the entire campus was dilapidated. I knew that with the technological know-how that our engineering team had, we could take the project far beyond what was initially proposed,” he recalls.

The first school to be undertaken for this project was the Government Vocational Higher Secondary School (GVHS) in Nadakkavu, Kerala (GVHSS-N), a -120year-old educational institution for girls. It received a holistic upgrade at a cost of Dh9 million that has changed the lives of all its pupils. The Nadakkavu upgrade has brought about a 300 per cent increase in terms of pupils in the higher secondary school that got A+s in all papers; ie from five students to 20 students compared with previous years. For the current year, the school has set itself a new target — to achieve 65 full A+ in high school, 75 full A+ in higher secondary and 2 full A+ in vocational higher secondary. Following the upgrade, the trend for admissions has already reversed: for each vacant seat there are now at least three applicants.

“One student sent us her first ever email from her own account, happily saying that she had scored all A+s in her exams. Another student came to us and said she was so proud of the new sports grounds that she was determined to practise and become part of the school football team,” said Kottikollon, who feels that poverty, illiteracy and a high dropout rate in government schools is seriously affecting the prospects of the country.

“Students are demotivated, teachers are indifferent; they have to contend with old, dull buildings, ill-equipped classrooms, toilets that are too few, and surroundings that are dirty. Even the quality of the free midday meal — which is a government initiative to make school attendance more appealing — is poor. All in all, it’s a sad commentary on things when 40 per cent of pupils in government-run schools drop out before reaching grade eight.”

‘Rallying call’

Kottikollon is positive that many other schools nationwide will be picked up for refurbishment by many other charity organisations after seeing what can be done.

“The ultimate goal of Mission 100 is to multiply the success story nationwide by inspiring many more PPPs to be created. The task at hand is immense as India has 1.2 million government schools in which 140 million pupils study because they are too poor to afford private schooling. The government on its own does not have the ability to carry out upgrades on such a massive scale. The private sector in India, it is my belief, needs to step in. Before the private sector gives its money and resources, however, it needs to be convinced that the end results will really lead to the betterment of pupils’ lives. For that to happen, they need to be shown an efficient model to develop government schools is in place. Mission 100 seeks to become that assurance. It is a rallying call to India’s resourceful private sector to join hands with the government and NGOs to bring about a transformation,” says Kottikollon who has inspired many UAE-based people from his community to come forward to help in this project.