

# UAE-based family gives schools in India hope



Through their Faizal and Shabana Foundation, Sharjah couple Faizal Kottikolon and Shabana Faizal teamed up with the local government in Mr Kottikolon's hometown of Kozhikode in southwest India to rebuild a crumbling 120-year-old government school for 2,400 girls.

An Indian entrepreneur and his wife are making headlines in their home country for kick-starting a project that could potentially transform state education in Kerala.

Sharjah couple Faizal Kottikolon and Shabana Faizal have teamed up with the local government in the town of Kozhikode to rebuild a crumbling 120-year-old government school for 2,400 girls.

"The challenge is many people cannot afford to go to private schools," said Mr Kottikolon, noting that 90 per cent of school-age children in India attend government schools.

"But all the governments have ignored the government schools saying that it is very difficult to bring it up to world standard. That is where we intervened last year with the government in Kerala."

Mr Kottikolon, an industrial engineer by training, made his fortune with Emirates Techno Casting, a steel casting business he started in Ajman in the late 1990s to supply parts for the oil and gas industry.

After selling the business for Dh1.5 billion, he realised he wanted to give something back to his home community.

“There are basic human needs we think that are still not taken care of: food, we still eat all this contaminated food, housing is very expensive, health care is very expensive, education is becoming very expensive. So, we said, with this vast experience we gained through industry, how do we apply that into these basic industries?”

Mr Kottikolon’s new business, the KEF Company, based in Dubai’s financial centre, operates an industrial park in India that uses precast concrete technology to develop prefabricated buildings.

The company’s philanthropic arm is the Faizal and Shabana Foundation.

Mr Kottikolon said his goal was to raise the quality of Kerala’s government schools to match the standards of private schools. He went so far as to fly an Indian politician to Dubai and give him a tour of the emirate’s private schools to show him a proper “benchmark” for the future of public education in India.

“Without government, local political will, it’s very difficult to change because the schools are owned by the government,” said Mr Kottikolon. “We went around and met with him and said this has to be a game changer.”

The politician, A Pradeep Kumar, was convinced by Mr Kottikolon’s vision and launched a project called Promoting Regional Schools to International Standards Through Multiple Interventions (Prism), establishing a partnership between the government and the foundation to rebuild the Government Vocational Higher Secondary School for Girls.

“All the broken-down buildings, we razed and kept only the heritage block,” said Mr Kottikolon. “We built this in 95 days and handed it back to the school the next academic year. What we have shown in these 95 days is we created all this positive ambience. Automatically, the self-confidence went up. It’s a three-prong attack: one is create this ambience, then motivation went up, then we brought external companies to train the teachers.”

The groundbreaking public-private partnership project is a source of pride for the foundation, said Sreekanth Sreenivasan, manager of business development for the KEF Company.

“We were able to build new facilities for them because we have an infrastructure company that does that. We upgraded the entire school,” said Mr Sreenivasan, noting the foundation invested about US\$2 million (Dh7.34m) in the project.

“Not only that, it was a holistic development, so we pulled in India’s premier management institution ... to re-skill the teachers, in terms of their training, their capability. So this school has become a model project in the state of Kerala and the government has taken notice and they want to now replicate this over the next couple of years.”

In conjunction with the Indian government, the Faizal and Shabana Foundation has launched an ambitious project called Mission 100 Schools, which aims to rebuild 100 government schools through public-private partnerships by the year 2020.

The government has agreed to fund 50 per cent of the cost of rebuilding the schools and the foundation has committed 10 per cent. Mr Kottikolon said he was organising a conference, to be held within the next three months, to persuade other Indian philanthropists and entrepreneurs in the UAE to contribute the remaining 40 per cent needed to fulfil the project.

The girls’ school that the foundation rebuilt was recently named one of the top 10 government schools in the country by Education World magazine in India.

“This is what we wanted to highlight, how things can transform so quickly,” Mr Kottikolon said. “If you bring in technology and convince human beings, everything is possible.”