



# **A DETERMINED BAND OF PARTNERS**

**ANSWERING THE CALL  
TO IMPROVE EDUCATION**

# INDIA

BY CHRISTY MACY

Half a dozen mud huts and a few vegetable gardens surround this one-room schoolhouse in Bigha, an isolated village of 400 families in India's West Bengal state. Views of rice fields stretch to the horizon, and buffalo-driven carts, piled high with crops, often block the dirt road connecting the village to a larger highway. **"Before, no one ever asked us what we needed," says one of the school's teachers. "Now I can ask questions and get answers. I'll be a better teacher because of this program."**

The answers come from a three-hour drive away, in the bustling city of Kolkata. "Welcome to LifeLines, thank you for calling," says one of four women "knowledge" workers occupying a small office high above the street. "In answer to your question, we suggest ...."

This is no ordinary call center. It's the knowledge hub for LifeLines-Education, a first-of-its-kind phone-based service that connects teachers in rural areas with much-needed academic support from India's education experts.

"Teachers, particularly those in isolated village schools, face extraordinary challenges," says Shubhra Chatterji, Executive Director of Vikramshila Education Resource Society (VERS), the managing partner for the service. She notes that most teachers in India are poorly paid, inadequately trained and overwhelmed by the number of students in their classrooms. The student/teacher ratio is often 100 to one, and many of those students are first-generation learners. Most rural schools don't own a single computer.

"Rural teachers are victims of a widening knowledge and digital divide that separates them from their urban counterparts," explains Chatterji. "Teachers are often blamed for everything that is wrong with today's education system, but we believe that teachers must be considered part of the solution."

LifeLines-Education helps bridge India's knowledge gap by giving teachers timely answers to academic questions and concerns and by empowering them with greater access to educational policy makers. Their questions cover a wide range of topics. "What can I do about a disruptive student who is holding back everyone else?" asks one teacher. "My textbook still says Pluto is a planet. How can I get more up-to-date material on the solar system?" asks another.

Teachers record their questions in their local language, using a specially designated phone line. The recorded queries—more than 2,000 so far—are then forwarded to and answered by the panel of 150 experts, including professors, school administrators and child psychologists. Every answer enters an ever-growing information database. Responses become available to teachers on the phone within 24 to 48 hours. Field volunteers on the ground facilitate the whole process.

OneWorld South Asia leads the service, with support from IYF, British Telecom and CISCO. It's an extension of the LifeLines-India program, developed to provide a similar support system for farmers in rural India.

Soon to benefit 40,000 students in 570 schools in one West Bengal district, LifeLines-Education is receiving positive reviews.

According to one teacher, "This kind of approach can help minimize the disparities between rural and urban schools. If we don't fix this soon," he warns, "we will have two kinds of societies in India. We have a responsibility to act."

### The Private Sector Gets Involved

LifeLines-Education is one of many pioneering strategies in India aimed at boosting educational opportunities among marginalized youth. Examination of some other initiatives sparks hope in the progress being made, but also exposes the enormous social and economic challenges facing this complex country of 1.1 billion people.

More than 40 percent of India's population is younger than 18. This "youth bulge" places an extraordinary burden on the country's already overwhelmed social services and infrastructure. In fact, half the population still has no electricity.

While it's clear the economy is booming—growing by nine percent for three consecutive years—policy makers and business leaders alike are concerned that most Indians,

who live on about \$4 a day, will not benefit unless far greater investments are made to support quality education and effective, relevant job training.

India is making historic investments in education. Every village of 1,000 residents now has a primary school, according to government sources, and schools have hired 100,000 teachers in the last year or so. Relevant and effective job training programs are also gaining ground. Yet it is clear that government alone cannot fully address current needs. In response, India's private sector has come forth as a key partner in helping to prepare young people for success in school and the workplace.

"Over the past decade, companies in India have begun to see the real potential in giving back and investing in the communities around them," says Supreet Singh, Executive Director of Youthreach, a Delhi-based NGO that is implementing youth programs countrywide. While Forbes magazine recently reported that four of the world's top 10 billionaires are CEOs of Indian companies, Singh says corporate social responsibility has only recently emerged as a force for social and economic progress in her country.

## IYF Across India

IYF and its more than 30 partners are carrying out a wide range of innovative programs across India to expand education and job training opportunities among some of the country's most at-risk youth.

**Total Investment:** US\$3.1 million

**Total Beneficiaries:** 85,000 children and youth

**Geographic Reach:** Bangalore, Delhi, Hyderabad, Mumbai and communities in West Bengal, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu



### Program Partners

Ankur Society for  
Alternatives in Education  
Amarjoti Rehabilitation Trust  
Association for Promotion of  
Social Action (APSA)  
Azim Premji Foundation  
Breads  
Byrraju Foundation  
Christel House India  
Community Collective Society  
for Integrated Development  
(CCFID)  
CAP Foundation  
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Don Bosco  
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Dr. Reddy's Foundation  
Drishti Media Collective  
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Janodaya Trust  
National Association for the Blind  
OneWorld South Asia  
Parikrma Humanity Foundation  
Pratham  
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Empowerment

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Video Volunteers  
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### Program Donors

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21-year-old Kirti (holding camera) helps make educational videos that are then used in local schools as a teaching aid for the teachers.

PHOTO: THOMAS WIECHERS

### Filmmakers Contribute to Classroom Quality

Nearly a thousand miles west of Kolkata, in the state of Gujarat, residents of a small village watch excitedly as Kirti, a 21-year-old aspiring filmmaker, focuses his camera on a young boy, his mother and a tethered goat. “Rolling ... action... Cut!” he yells, the action temporarily halted by a large herd of goats invading the set. Some children try to direct them back into the field.

Kirti is one of the video “producers” being trained by Videoshala (video school)—a community-based program to develop educational videos for schools as part of the formal curriculum. One of many programs in India supported by IYF’s QUEST Alliance, Videoshala was created by Drishti, a leading human rights and media organization; Video Volunteers; and Udaan, a resource center on primary education. Local NGOs carry out the program.

Since 1992, Drishti has facilitated programs involving community radio, documentary filmmaking, human rights advocacy and community media. In response to the 2002 riots which sparked sectarian violence in Gujarat, the organization has given particular attention to how communications can bridge the divides between Hindus and Muslims. Videoshala is Drishti’s most recent project, designed to give community members like Kirti marketable skills while creating videos that teachers can use to enliven difficult-to-teach subjects, such as biology, energy, the environment and career counseling. The program offers schools video “kits” that include the video, an activities manual and a student worksheet, as well as a classroom facilitator to run the class.

During the past year, the Videoshala project trained 24 community video producers and reached out to 2,800 students in more than 60 regional schools. “We want to create videos that show different perspectives from the textbooks,” says 21-year-old Jayshree, a producer working with Kirti on the project.

“By having local residents produce these educational films, using familiar village scenes and local dialects, we help teachers and schools make education more meaningful and interactive, while also bringing about change,” says Stalin K., Drishti’s Executive Director. He is pleased that some schools show evidence that the videos are increasing student knowledge levels in particular subjects as well as improving interactive teaching practices. He also values the program for its ability to empower members of marginalized communities to secure greater access to services and educational opportunities.

Kirti, a third-year university student, has gained more than the marketable technical skills of shooting scenes, writing scripts and working with volunteer actors. “I’ve learned how to work as part of a team and feel more confident that I can express myself,” he says. He works with a mixed group—men and women, Hindus and Muslims. Such interaction between different genders and religions is highly unusual in these rural communities, and it has had a powerful impact on Kirti.

“Before this experience, I would not even talk with girls, but now I work with one.” As a Dalit (a member of the lower caste, also known as “untouchables”), he must struggle against deep-seated discrimination in housing,

## Rays of Hope for a Devastated Community

The tsunami that smashed into the small southeastern Indian coastal fishing village of Killai on December 26, 2004, destroyed an already fragile community—washing away homes and killing countless family members. Nearly 11,000 people here lost their lives. The huge wave also crushed the local fishing industry, the only livelihood most residents had ever known.

Today, as part of a long-term reconstruction effort, a group of village women, most in their 20s, have developed their own small business—“fattening” mud crabs and selling them at the local market. The project generates a steady income of US\$75 a month per member. For many, it’s their first job. The women receive support from the Community Collective Society for Integrated Development (CCFID), a local NGO that provides basic entrepreneurial and management training and small loans to help groups in need to begin businesses.

“These young women who lost everything now have something of their own,” explains Meenal Patole, Advisor for New Initiatives at CCFID. “It’s a real change, and it’s transforming their lives.” Nokia, as well as the Sylvan/Laureate Foundation and Unocal, all working with IYF, provide critical funding for the Tsunami Reconstruction Initiative, which includes this project in India and similar efforts in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The goal: to rebuild the livelihoods of 9,800 young people across these tsunami-affected countries.



*A group of young women are running a local crab fattening business supported through IYF. PHOTO: JEAN-PIERRE ISBENDJIAN*

education, access to public services and other areas. “Being in this program, I realized you must do everything you can, and work very hard, to get to your dreams.” Jayshree adds, “Our society is so separated between different customs, communities and genders. How do you cross these boundaries? It’s not easy, but film is a powerful tool for change.”

### Adding Know-How and Financial Resources

Videoshala and LifeLines-Education are initiatives of IYF’s Education & Employment Alliance (EEA), a multi-sector initiative in six Middle Eastern and Asian countries working to meet the education and job needs of underserved youth. Launched through a US\$13 million grant from USAID, EEA has also garnered significant multi-sector support, having leveraged US\$9 million from corporate and other funding sources across the region. The private sector here plays a key role in supporting a wide range of programs carried out by Quest Alliance—EEA’s partner in India.

One of India’s top corporate leaders has taken it upon himself to tackle the nation’s educational challenges. He’s Azim Premji, Chairman of Wipro Corporation, a US\$5 billion global organization in IT services, hardware, consumer products and construction equipment based in Bangalore. In 2001, Premji invested some of his personal fortune to

start a foundation dedicated to improving the quality of education in India’s government schools.

“We wanted to do something significant in the social sector,” says Parth Sarwate, Head of Advocacy at the Azim Premji Foundation (APF). “We looked at different issues, including health and poverty reduction, and realized that we could impact them all by focusing on education.”

APF, which pilots successful experiments and then takes them to scale with help from state schools, has an ambitious agenda. “We want to concentrate on systemic change,” says Sarwate, “by improving school management, looking at teacher issues and curriculum development, and promoting non-rote classroom assessments. We want to bring a professional approach associated with the corporate sector to the education system,” he added, “to make it more outcomes-driven and accountable.”

Among its initiatives, APF works with IYF, Alcatel-Lucent, Microsoft and local NGOs to support computer-aided learning and teacher training in 1,500 primary schools, with the goal of reaching close to a million young people in 4,000 schools by the end of 2008.

In India today, many companies have a tradition of funding small community projects. Yet more and more now



## Vulnerable Youth Prepared to Work

Forced to drop out of school because her family had no money, 19-year-old Suresh is now learning to build electronics parts through a job training program in Bangalore. The young people attending these courses, implemented by the Association for Promoting Social Action (APSA) and funded through an IYF/Alcatel-Lucent partnership, are gaining much-needed job experience in printing, electronics, computers and tailoring.

Some participants are among India's most vulnerable youth—child laborers, street children and children of migrant workers. For Suresh, whose father struggles to support his family as a casual laborer, the APSA programs helped her gain valuable job-related experience. She also benefited from a life skills program now supported by the GE Foundation and USAID. "I've learned how to make healthy decisions, to respect myself and to face job interviews without fear," she says.



## IYF in India — By the Numbers

### At-Risk Youth Prepared for Jobs

- 13,140 out-of-school youth participate in IT, job training, and life skills programs
- 2,360 youth affected by the tsunami gain access to business and management training and small business loans

### Improved Educational Opportunities

- 2,790 students receive enhanced learning opportunities and messages about diversity and citizenship through content-rich videos

- 15,610 students benefit from career exploration, vocational, self-employment and employability training
- Students in 1,500 schools gain access to computer-aided learning
- 11,170 students enhance their life and employability skills including communications, time management and teamwork
- 40,000 students in 570 rural schools benefit from better prepared teachers
- 1,800 rural teachers receive critical academic support and instruction training

realize that to remain cutting-edge in an increasingly global market, they must make strategic, long-term investments in human development, education and the environment.

Along with India's newly mobilized CSR sector, global companies are also playing a growing role. Says Janaki Chaudhry, a Vice President for GE in India, "We want to be not just a great company, but also, by giving back, a good company," she says. "It's our responsibility to build bridges and close the gaps between so many of these impoverished communities and those that have access to technology and jobs."

The GE Foundation, based in Fairfield, Connecticut, is deeply committed to employee engagement worldwide, investing not only significant funds to support community-based programs, but also time and effort in mobilizing and training its employees to volunteer. In one such program in India, the GE Foundation works with IYF to provide life skills and employability training to more than 11,000 underserved youth in Delhi, Hyderabad and Bangalore.

"We helped design the curriculum, worked with our NGO partner Youthreach, provided the space for many meetings and ran focus groups to discover what young people learned from the program," says Chaudhry. "The real les-

son for us," she adds, "is that companies need to recognize the value of working with NGOs, who are real experts in the field of development. It's all about collaboration and connectivity."

Mahatma Gandhi, who led India in a non-violent campaign for freedom and social reform more than 60 years ago, once said that "a small band of determined spirits, fueled by an unquenchable faith in their mission, can alter the course of history." Today, ordinary citizens striving to make a difference are being joined by leaders in every sector of India's society, along with global companies and international NGOs. While huge disparities remain, new opportunities—including better schools and effective job training—are emerging to benefit India's most vulnerable and underserved populations. And in many of these communities, young people equipped with new skills and confidence are leading the way. **Y**

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*Christy Macy is Director of Publications at the International Youth Foundation. This article is based on a January 2008 trip to India, where she visited IYF-supported programs in six regions of the country.*