



Education and knowledge are power; it's the only way to change the world they say. The very purpose of education is to create windows; replace an empty mind with an open one. In the modern society with influences coming from different directions, education helps us decipher what to take in; it helps us make informed decisions after weighing the pros and cons and moulds us into functional, contributing members of a developing, productive society. It is also the catalyst needed to pull families and communities out of the cycle of poverty. Knowledge gives children the power to dream of a better future and confidence needed to pursue a full education, which in turn will help generations to come. The onus for the awakening therefore falls on education.

In a country of a population of 139 billion like ours, with 60% of its people living below the poverty-line, 100% literacy rate is indeed a tall order. We need a strong and efficient workforce of educated people to contribute to our growth. The reformers, the advisors and the leaders all agree on one thing though – that the change needs to come; one at a time, by starting small, sustaining

that growth, feeling encouraged by the little growth and keeping that momentum going. It's the little things that eventually make the big things happen.

Schools therefore have a huge role to play. They are at the grass-roots enabling exposure, facilitating teaching of concepts, shaping the mind, creating free-thinking individuals who will go on to take responsibilities and making choices that will govern the course of their lives. In a country that still believes that more children means more hands to work and therefore more earnings, to kindle the spark of learning and to break free of prevalent notions of work trumping over education is indeed a huge challenge. Especially more so in the lowermost, socio-economically most backward and psychologically battered and beleaguered echelons of a society. Their focus remains rooted in earning a basic living to take care of the primary needs. How then would people from such backgrounds be willing to let their earning member go to school to get an education?

Chennai Girls Higher Secondary School (CGHSS) on M.H Road, Perambur is a school

கல்வியாண்டு	பெயர்	பதிப்பெண்
2002-03	எஸ்.ஜி.சுந்தர்	1072
2003-04	வி.சுந்தர்	1101
2004-05	டி.உமாசுந்தர்	1118
2005-06	தயானா	1104
2006-07	பி.ஜெயலக்ஷ்மி	1113
2007-08	எம்.சுவாமி	1143
2008-09	பி.ரமணி	1107
2009-10	எஸ்.சுபா	1128
2010-11	எம்.லக்ஷ்மி	1133
2011-12	செ.ஜெயலக்ஷ்மி	1144
2012-13	சு.சுபா	1102
2013-14	எஸ்.சுசுந்தர்	1143
2014-15	எஸ்.அர்ச்சுனா	1149
2015-16	ஐ.ஐஸ்வர்யா	1151
	வி.பவீத்ரா	1151
2016-17	எஸ்.தேவ்விமாதி	1173
2017-18	சி.ஜெ.ஜெயலக்ஷ்மி	1176

that believes in inculcating this willingness to learn, in sensitizing the parents about the importance of education, enabling the motivation to keep at it and instilling the confidence in a child that he too can create a space for himself in the world. One may think of it as just another Corporation school in Chennai, but the school students (past and present), the teachers and the head of the school beg to differ. CGHSS is nothing like the others.

There is an open joy evident on the face of Ms. Selvakumari, the Headmistress, as she speaks about the school. The objective of most schools is to keep the institution running or produce great results in the board exams. The objective of CGHSS is simple. It is to empower the under-privileged with confidence, to motivate them to attend school regularly, introduce students to a multitude of things ranging from art, music, dance, yoga, entrepreneurial possibilities and avenues that would make them independent. CGHSS was one of the first to be established

when Corporations high schools were started in 1966 by the then chief minister, Thiru. C.N. Annadurai. It eventually upgraded to higher secondary in the year 1977. The school is exclusively for girls mostly from the underprivileged communities living in North Chennai areas like Perambur, Vyasarpadi, Kodungaiyur, Erukkancheri, Kannadasan Nagar, Manali and Madhavaram. One could say, the most well-to-do parent of the school may be an auto driver.

Around 2300 students study in the school of which children from broken homes and of single parents form a majority. Since there is a higher possibility of these children from these backgrounds too following debilitating patterns set at home, Selvakumari madam stresses on the need to strengthen the quality of education in the higher classes.

She takes pride in the fact that her team of teachers is on par with trained teachers from national boards and credits them for the success of CGHSS, Perambur model. Each teacher, she says, feels a sense of ownership and they take it upon themselves to acquaint themselves on a one-to-one basis with each student. Every day, time is spent on observing the students for tell-tale signs of abuse, depression or turmoil. On sensing trouble, the student is separately questioned to understand the problem, after which the teacher in question consults past teachers to understand in-depth the behavior pattern and arrive at ways to tackle in forms of giving leadership roles, or giving responsibilities to enhance self-esteem. Each teacher is aware of the background and the issues faced by the students and they meticulously follow up for any kind of trouble-shooting. The teachers are constantly trained in counseling and made to attend workshops conducted by various NGOs. Their guidance continues till each student comes up to the level of facing competitive exams, enrolling in college for graduate studies and eventually finding a way to become independent.



The most distinctive feature of the school that sets the school apart from every other school is the fact that for a period of up to 8 years after the student has passed out of the school, the teachers keep track of the students' progress. If there are obstacles on the students' path, the teachers take it upon themselves to find a way to help the student get past. Financial hurdles are overcome by putting the student on to donors who are willing. College admissions are also procured by speaking to the concerned persons in authority. If it's the parents blockading the progress then they are counseled and made to see reason. This kind of hand-holding gives the student the much needed feeling of security and enables her confident step forward.

Truancy is a common feature of such schools given the backgrounds and mindsets. Selvakumari madam says to get past that, they partnered with NalandaWay a non-profit that provides free arts programmes, yoga and photography sessions for children to bridge social divides while giving children from disadvantaged homes a means to express themselves, to draw them out and keep them motivated to come to school. The Chennai Airport showcases some of the artwork of these students. Dance programmes, music competitions and art festivals thanks to the CSRs of many organizations have ensured the children

are given opportunities to express themselves. The Thiru Vi Ka Speakers' Forum is another platform where students get to hear perspectives on various relevant topics. Thulir-Jantar Mantar Science Exam was another opportunity for furthering a scientific bent of mind the teachers felt and hence they themselves pooled in the entry fee to enable access for the students. Rotary Club's Wings-To-Fly, an oratorical programme that flies the winners to London, NalandaWay's Kanavu Pattarai – a novel writing contest and many more like these keep the students hooked.

More than academics, it's this multitude of co-scholastic ventures that ensure students' regularity. The teachers are constantly on their feet scouting and planning for different activities to keep them interested. The different opportunities for these children who otherwise would never have access to such projects engender a spirit that motivates them to participate. The distribution of dry rations of rice, lentils and eggs is also an incentive for many to come to school. Every month an expert from some field visits the school as a way of career-counseling. Hearing these experts and their success stories sows the seeds of aspiration in the minds of these children. Regular career counseling with the help of Rotarians, directives and help from Greater Chennai Corporation Senior School Welfare

Schemes, Lions Club etc have helped achieve this goal.

Selvakumari madam speaks of many application-oriented vocational training that get past gender stereotypes. Apart from cooking and sewing, automotive repairing, welding and electronics are all available. Courses on financial literacy, agriculture and plans for a bio-gas unit are in the pipeline. Taekwondo, kick-boxing and silambam have also been introduced as options for the girls as these have national-level possibilities. The teachers also facilitate Government diploma exams that would enable entrepreneurial possibilities for them.

Selvakumari ma'am sits back with the contentment she feels when she says, her own students have created a world for themselves. Some who have made a mark in the film world have come back to help with choreography for dance festivals, one has accompanied A.R. Rahman's group as a singer in a tour abroad, some are rank holders in Anna University, some pursuing medicine and one even enrolled at NIFT. More than anything she talks about them going out into their world armed with the confidence gleaned. And when they visit they want to give back to the newer students a little bit of what they got from the school. Since the world is facing a pandemic, with the lockdown, imparting knowledge is indeed a challenge, considering the fact that most children do not have access to wi-fi or even smartphones. Through CSRs smartphones were made available for the senior children. The teachers keep in touch by calling them and speaking to them regularly. They then prepare the lessons in notes forms, click pictures and send them through pdf files on whatsapp. Since the parents leave for work taking their phones with them, the school enables early morning or late night session for teaching through video calls sessions.

Nothing, she says comes easy. There are



always hurdles but along with them there are solutions waiting for those who are willing to look. The gut-wrenching stories of these children with the numerous trials and tribulations and their unending emotional needs keep the teachers determined. This teaching they believe is conceptual and intellectual, abstract and concrete, creative and sequential. It's more child-centric, framed through real life experiences and borne out of a need to customize education to fit the growing needs of these children. Their measure of success is not academic brilliance alone. It goes beyond and above. A student that gets 90% can easily be coached to get 100% but it's the child that's limping far away behind that the school focuses on. The school's vision is to create socially-responsible citizens with critical thinking, to teach them to face the outside life, to be independent and survive.

Selvakumari madam smiles contentedly and says a lot has been done, but lot more awaits. The spark in her eyes speaks of being ready to face it all.