



INDI-GENIUS

Indians are one of a type. That typicality gives them their distinguishing and enduring profile

BY PAVAN K. VARMA

A Russian historian once said to me that those who think that people are only the products of today and have no history, are plain stupid. Societies and peoples in the throes of the challenges of the present, especially if things are going better than expected, often are stupid. They genuinely believe that the traits that make them distinctive have no pedigree, and that their achievements are severed from any anchorage in the past.

Indians—perhaps more than most other people—have no reason to be stupid. They are the legatees of a culture that goes back to the dawn of time. That culture has had an almost unbroken continuity for the last 5,000 years. In the course of that eventful journey, much has been assimilated from outside, but in a syncretic way, without overwhelming the indigenous. As a consequence of all of the above, Indian society has seen peaks of refinement, innovation and ingenuity that have few parallels anywhere else.

Such a cultural package, notable for its antiquity, continuity, assimilation, diversity and refinement, is wrapped in one unmistakable foil: survivability. For all their spiritual halo—and the sheer loftiness of Indian metaphysics and philosophy perhaps justifies it—Indians have been exceptionally porous to the opportunities of the material world, and have learnt to pursue them in the most ingenious ways, should circumstances permit. In fact, entrepreneurship in the service of material gain is an irresistible Indian trait. The very poor have been deprived of the opportunity to practise it, but recent experience shows that given an opportunity, they are as good as the rest.

About Hole-in-the-Wall (HiWEL)

Lighting the spark of learning

Hole-in-the-Wall Education Ltd. (HiWEL) is a joint venture between NIIT Ltd. and the International Finance Corporation (a part of The World Bank Group).

Coinciding with the Republic Day in 1999, NIIT decided to do yet another meaningful act for the society, by first testing this innovative technology in a slum in South Delhi, located adjacent to one of its software factories. *As an experiment, a Hole in the Wall was made*, through the centre's compound wall and a computer screen was installed, facing the slum. The effects were monitored by the R&D lab located in-house. It was observed that children were doing a number of interesting things with the computer, without any assistance. It was haphazard, but it had a sense of discovery & learning. This laid the foundation for further research which helped NIIT finally develop Playground Learning Stations (PLS), to give children their own private window to access the knowledge of the world.

Formally called Minimally Invasive Education, the experiment was replicated in two other rural sites in the same year. The first adopter of the idea was the Government of NCT of Delhi, which set up 30 Playground Learning Stations in a resettlement colony by 2000.

With the formation of HiWEL in 2001, a national research program was started, in which Learning Stations were set up in 23 locations across rural India. In 2004, the Hole-in-the-Wall reached Cambodia through the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

Today, more than 300,000 children have benefited from 300 Hole-in-the-Wall stations over last 8 years. The number is going to double with more than 200 stations being installed in 2009. Besides India, HiWEL also has projects in African countries like Uganda, Rwanda, Mozambique, Zambia, Swaziland, Botswana, Nigeria and in Cambodia.

HiWEL is now poised to scale up the idea of Hole-in-the-Wall to make a significant contribution to improving elementary education and life skills of children across the world, especially those in disadvantaged communities in rural areas and urban slums.

What started as an experiment from a Hole-in-the-Wall, has become India's gift to the world.



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THE INDIAN GENIUS

Simple local solutions change lives across the nation



Inside: NIIT's Hole-in-the-Wall, "What started as an experiment has become India's gift to the world." says Rajendra S Pawar, Chairman NIIT.

LETTER FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR



Dear reader,

THINK OF INDIAN GENIUS, and names like Patanjali and Panini, Aryabhata and Bhaskara, Kalidasa and Kabir, Tagore and Gandhi, J.C. Bose

and C.V. Raman glow in our minds. They fill us with pride and admiration, as do great emperors like Ashoka and Akbar and the builders of magnificent temples and monuments like Ajanta and Ellora, Konark and Khajuraho, Humayun's Tomb and the magical Taj. These are extraordinary beings with a rare brilliance, celebrated in songs and tomes. No less fascinating is the Indian genius for survival, for adaptation and for grabbing opportunity where only a ghost of it exists. This is genius of a desperate kind, which manifests in cooking mango kernels for starving mouths.

Our 26th Anniversary Special Issue celebrates another facet of the Indian genius, a genius for low-cost technology, for making the most of what is available: the ingenuity of a dhaba owner who used a washing machine to whip up lassi, an entrepreneur who made paper from elephant dung, an artist who designed the famous Jaipur Foot, an NGO which put computers in holes in the village wall, the rustic mechanics who made the rugged Maruta with little more than a noisy motor. There are many more such innovations in these pages, some of them quirky but cleverly tweaked to suit the peculiar Indian conditions. One would call it heroic human endeavour in miniature.

As the author Pavan Varma writes in the opening essay, Indians hate to waste anything; they allow nothing to go obsolete. Fired with a creative urge, they cannot resist knocking together useful things from what others might call junk. It is almost a biological compulsion, like the beaver cutting down trees to build its underwater lodge. THE WEEK's own biological urge is Journalism With A Human Touch—the fingerprints are visible all over the stories in this issue, just as they were in the poignant stories of the human condition we ran in the 2008 Independence Day Special Issue titled 'Wake Up, India'.

Like everything else in India, genius coexists with incongruities. Delightful incongruities and unusual combinations are the theme of volume 2

of the Anniversary Special, which looks at some odd pairings that can happen perhaps only in India. Who else but ingenious Indians could have thought of spiking pani puri with vodka—an east-west fusion of tangy and distilled wisdom? The ancient Bhagwad Gita and modern management gurus are another strange pair. And numerous Indian restaurants survive on the hugely popular Gobi Manchurian, a curious concoction that would mystify any genuine Chinese chef.

The celebration of Indian genius continues in the youth section. Cool, creative and energetic, the young people featured here have defied the image of a self-absorbed generation obsessed with the latest gizmos. These are people passionate about making a difference to life around them—be it through dance or social activism, or by helping others kick addiction or simply cheering up the elderly.

These twin issues look at a range of other subjects from a different perspective. There is an elegiac note in the section on environment, which looks in trepidation at seven ecologically fragile tourist destinations. In cinema, we present Breakthrough Performances—ten memorable roles in Hindi and regional cinema that influenced not just the art and craft of filmmaking but also attitudes and mannerisms of viewers. The art section is again a celebration of vibrant young talent doing India proud on the international scene. The business section is about the biggest personality brands, like Shah Rukh Khan who earns Rs 100 crore a year from product endorsements, more than what he earns from his films. India Calling, in the sports section, is in essence about globalisation: how major soccer clubs like Manchester United are eyeing India to boost their image, income and talent. And there is political insight in the times of neighbourly terror and insidious geopolitics: what kind of government will emerge in 2009.

No Anniversary Issue would be complete without our ascetic astrologer Vamanan Nampoothiri's forecast for 2009. Just look up to the stars, who knows, your future could be there in THE WEEK.

I wish you Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Philip Mathew

Philip Mathew

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SANJAY AHLAWAT

EDUCATION

Hole in the wall exposes slum children to computers

BY SONI MISHRA

A good number of children in Madangir, a low-income locality of Delhi, are computer geeks who spend hours in front of a PC. A 'hole in the wall' transports them instantaneously from their poverty-stricken lives into a world of knowledge and fun.

The hole in the wall—which is actually a kiosk with computers set in depressions in a wall—has the same bewitching effect on children in the area as perhaps the fabled Pied Piper did on the children of Hamelin.

The children have open access to the computers and are encouraged to find out for themselves how to

use them. With minimal intervention they draw, paint, play games, go through educational material and improve their language skills. Set up eight years ago, the hole in the wall in Madangir is painted bright yellow and has five computers. Open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., it is abuzz with youngsters all day. Prominent among them is nine-year-old Shabnam, a computer-crazy brat. The other children don't mess with her, allowing her maximum use of the kiosk. Not at all shy, the little girl with a lisp describes her favourite game on the computer, 'Bhookha magarmach' (Hungry Crocodile). "The crocodile eats you up if you

MY MACHINE: Little geeks

give a wrong answer. I have never been eaten," she says proudly.

Ruby, a student of class 10, who comes to the kiosk less frequently than before because she has to devote more time to studying for the Board exams, talks about how the children have come up with their own terminology for various computer icons. "We call the cursor 'teer' [arrow] and the hourglass 'doodh ka katora' [cup of milk]. The kids often say 'yeh doodh ka katora kab bharega' [when will the cup of milk fill up?] when the hourglass icon is on and they are waiting," she says. "In the beginning, I would play games and watch cartoons on the computer. Then slowly, I started going through information on different subjects like English, maths, science and social studies."

The hole in the wall has a tie-up with the government's campaign for universalising education, and targets children who are out of school. According to Manoj, a supervisor at

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a learning centre in the Hauz Rani area of Delhi, a sizeable number of children who are using the kiosk are school dropouts. "Only last week, I got 10 children re-admitted to school," he says. "The content is such that it encourages children to go back to school, coupled with the pep talk that we give them."

The kiosks are set up near schools so that they catch the eye of school-

children and encourage the drop-outs to get back to school. One of the computer games is based on the 'School chale hum' song of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, an education programme of the Union government.

The success of the project lies in the unrestricted use of computers and the innovative content, which is interactive and multimedia-based. As there is little intervention by the supervisor, the concept is child-centric and not teacher-centric, providing for self-paced learning in a playful atmosphere. Computer skills are passed on by older children to the younger ones.

True to its motto "Some walls are meant to break barriers," the hole in the wall—a brainchild of Dr Sugata Mitra, educationist and chief scientist, NIIT—is breaking the digital divide for underprivileged children not only in Delhi but in different parts of the country, as well as the rest of Asia and Africa.

The project began as a research experiment in 1999 when Mitra installed a computer on the wall

TECH TOYS: Children draw, paint, play games and go through educational material

separating the NIIT office from a slum situated next door, in Kalkaji in south Delhi. It was a big success and children who had no exposure to computers took to the PC instantly and learnt to use it on their own.

"We decided to do a meaningful act coinciding with Republic Day in 1999. We had a city slum outside one of our software factories in south Delhi. We thought, why not do something for the slum children that can be their window of knowledge to the world," recalls NIIT Chairman R.S. Pawar.

"For the nine countries where we have initiated the hole in the wall, one aspect is common—the pace of learning computer basics is extremely rapid. The children get hooked from day one and remain hooked for a long time," says Pawar. "What started with an experiment has now become India's gift to the world." ■

SMALL REVOLUTIONARIES

Eleven-year-old Ubed heads a panchayat in Uttar Pradesh. His playmates are the other members of the council. Many such councils or Bal Panchayats have been formed across India by Bachpan Bachao Andolan, a movement for children's rights.

Bal Panchayats strengthen BBA's campaigns by spreading awareness on the importance of education. Formed in 1980 and led by Kailesh Satyarthi, BBA works to root out child labour and child marriage, and ensure that the little ones get education. So far, 238 villages have been made child-friendly.