



**Hidden talent:** Six-year-old Mrigank Bhatnagar, from Father Agnel school, Noida, takes chess as seriously as any other subject

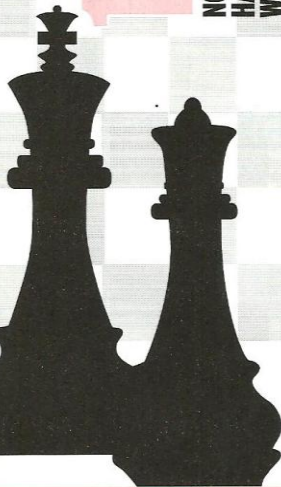
## CHESS IN SCHOOLS

# Right Move

**Vishwanathan** Anand loves to play chess. He would, he is world champion. But he also loves to see schoolchildren play chess, especially because he believes it helps sharpen their learning skills. He has translated this belief into action, by partnering with information technology education company NIIT, of which he is the brand ambassador, to create a programme

called NIIT MindChampions' Academy. The academy promotes chess among students in the seven to 17 age group through the schools in which NIIT provides computer-aided education. "A movement like this will push students to play chess and lead a healthy school life," says Anand, on the phone from Chennai.

It all started in early 2001, at a party NIIT threw to celebrate Anand's first world champion-



15th ANNIVERSARY

1.5 MILLION  
NO. OF STUDENTS NIIT MINDCHAMPIONS' ACADEMY HAS TOUCHED ACROSS MORE THAN 16,000 SCHOOLS WITH ITS CHESS LEARNING PROGRAMME

ship title. At the party was World Chess

Federation (FIDE) President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, who was then also the President of a tiny Buddhist enclave called the Republic of Kalmykia, in Russia's south-west. Its capital Elista is called the world's chess capital.

That evening, the chess-obsessed Ilyumzhinov – he was his country's champion at 14 – described to Rajendra Pawar, NIIT's Chairman, how making chess compulsory in schools in Kalmykia had improved academic performance and also brought down the crime rate amongst students there.

An impressed Pawar later talked to Anand about it. Within a year, Anand and NIIT had together created the MindChampions' Academy. Schools that use NIIT's computer learning solutions are offered the MindChampions' Academy module as a value-added feature – free of cost in government schools, and on payment in private schools.

NIIT provides a kit to each such school, including computer-based chess tutorials and chess-playing software. The kit also has a process manual on how to form chess clubs. Schoolteachers are trained in the game, and are responsible for running the clubs. Special classes are slotted during school hours in which students play chess. For instance, Noida-based Father Agnel School has seven such clubs, each with 30 to 40 students, from the sixth to the 12th grade.

NIIT says the MindChampions' Academy has so far touched 1.5 million children in over 16,600 schools. It also cites a 2010 study it conducted – across 24 schools and 11,000 students – that found students learn better in school hours if they play chess in a classroom environment. According to the study, the students' end of year (academic) scores had considerably improved in subjects such as maths and science.

One such student is Bappi Deb, a Class



12 student of Teliamura Higher Secondary School in West Tripura. Deb's aggregate marks were 79 per cent in Class 11, much better than the 65 per cent he scored in Class 10. There is, of course, no scientific evidence on how much of this could have been influenced by chess.

Taking the school learning forward, NIIT organises tournaments through the year, at school, district, zonal and national levels. "At one of the zonal tournaments in Hyderabad, I met tribal boys who had come to play chess," says Anand, who spends a week each year attending the zonal competitions and the finals. He also plays the game with some kids at these events – a rare opportunity for the little masters.

NIIT's Pawar says the opportunity is huge: "More than 400 million students are currently part of the school system. There's so much hidden talent that we need to explore."

However, chess suffers as students go into higher classes. "I was an active player until about Class 8," says Sagar Mukherjee, a Class 11 student at Father Agnel. "Although my interest has not waned. I am unable to devote the same amount of time nowadays." Concurrs Jaydeep Sharma, a FIDE-certified chess instructor: "Students are under pressure (from parents) to perform well in academics."

The little ones, of course, are not subject to such constraints yet. Mrigank Bhatnagar, a six-year-old student of Class I at Father Agnel, likes to play chess during his 'games period'. "I take chess as seriously as any other subject," he says. His best performance? When he defeated his 12-year-old brother in just 12 moves.

Whether chess has improved Bhatnagar's, and thousands of other students', cognitive skills or not is a moot question. But the very effort to bring chess to the grassroots level is laudable, and offers hope for the future. ♦

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