

Educating young India from the grassroots



■ Shaheen Mistry (centre), founder of Teach For India, with underprivileged children during a musical performance recently

Gauri Kohli

A summer break during her undergraduate programme at Tufts University was a life-changing experience for Shaheen Mistry. Mistry came to Mumbai in 1989 mid term and walked into one of the city's infamous slums and was greatly moved by the neglected plight of children.

"I decided at that point that I needed to stay in India and do something about it. I dropped out of Tufts and enrolled in a sociology bachelor's degree programme at St Xavier's College, and began educating underprivileged children after college. Two years later, in 1991, I started the Akanksha Foundation – which pioneered the idea of using vacant classrooms of mainstream schools, colleges and offices after work hours as learning centres for underprivileged children. Teach For India happened in 2007, when I realised that something on a much larger scale was required to eradicate educational inequity from our country."

Having started Akanksha Foundation at just 18, Mistry never thought that it would go on to become an organisation in itself. "I had just moved back to India at that point and I simply walked into a slum and started teaching. All the incredible instances of hope and inspiration that I encountered along the way just kept pushing me to do more. Teach For India was an idea that sparked to life in 2006 when I met Wendy Kopp, CEO and Founder of Teach For America, to discuss the feasibility of adapting Teach For America's model to the Indian context. A few months later, the plan to place the first cohort of Teach For India Fellows was put in place," she says.

Teach For India is a nationwide movement of the country's most promising college graduates and young professionals who commit two-years to teaching full-time in low-income and under-resourced

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SHAHEEN MISTRY, founder, TFI

schools. Informed by their experiences and insights, these alumni strive to work from inside and outside the educational system to effect fundamental, long-term changes to try and ensure that one day, all children in India will attain education.

Mistry shared an anecdote which summarised the value of the work she's started. "A month ago, I received a short video of a Teach For India classroom fully engaged in learning as they watched their teacher teach – on a screen. Hiloni, their teacher, had a 103 degree fever and so had decided to videotape a three-hour lesson so that her students didn't miss a day of learning. I asked her why she did this. She was thinking about how her students cook in the morning, are responsible for their siblings, live a half-hour walk away, and yet – through the heat or monsoon, without complaining – they come to school. This got me thinking about how fortunate I am. I had a fever and an infection and so many loved ones looking after me. And then here were my kids who, despite their individual battles, fought their way to school every day. It wasn't my need to teach that made me do it. It was their need to learn that inspired me."

Talking about the best thing she has learnt from her work, Mistry says, "Every person has a role to play – it only takes one little step forward."

Surrounding herself with children is the ultimate inspiration. "There is no better way to remind myself and my team of why we do the work we do and what is at stake when we fail," she adds.