



In January this year, many Goans watched a video on social media and Whatsapp of a Swedish acapella group, Vocal Colors, rendering a beloved Goan song *Tambdde Rosa*. The Swedish acapella group were Goa to collaborate with Child's Play India Foundation led by Dr. Luis Francisco Dias. The Foundation was set up about 10 years ago with the aim of training underprivileged kids in classical music and continues to do so today. The story of the Foundation's inception and work provides important lessons for a deeply unequal society as that of India.

A former gynecologist and obstetrician, Dr. Dias moved back to Goa from the United Kingdom to set up the Foundation in 2009. So, why did he leave an established medical practice in the UK? As happens with so many who pursue careers in medicine or engineering or suchlike lucrative professions, Dr. Dias felt his calling to be elsewhere. His heart was not in medicine. When he encountered the opportunity to work in the UK, Dr. Dias thought that he could exploit the numerous musical opportunities available there while he worked as a doctor. And exploit them he did!

But there was also something greater than self-interest that was nagging Dr. Dias. He saw the great inequalities, especially amongst poor children, in India, and felt it was unfair that some should have opportunities and others not. Could something be done about it? Could classical music be the way to do something about it? The Foundation started gaining shape once Dr. Dias witnessed the performance of the El Sistema Orchestra and the Buskaid Soweto String Project Orchestra. The Foundation, while taking its inspiration from El Sistema, a movement founded in Venezuela by José Antonio Abreu in 1975, share something in common with it as far as an unequal society is concerned: the belief in the transformative power of music.

So, what is the vision of the Foundation? According to Dr. Dias's public presentations, the Foundation is driven by the idea that, in an unequal society, deprived children need to be systematically given opportunities. At the core of this idea is also the belief that the inner potential of underprivileged children will only be developed if they are given a chance. And one can easily agree with this vision. Deprivation in India commences with the lack of opportunities at birth, especially in the case of the underprivileged. This starts right at the level of formative education and is more severe in the formal and institutional level with gross inequalities observed in schools, colleges, and universities. The Foundation, therefore, uses music to overcome the flawed educational system currently in place in India.

And it works! I had the privilege to attend one of the Foundation's annual concerts back in

2015. A large part of the audience was composed of the parents of the Foundation's trainees. These parents were easily distinguishable, mostly daily wage laborers and domestic helps, by their clothes. These are parents who can pay for expensive private schools and coaching classes. Neither could they afford expensive extracurricular activities. Yet, like any parents, they were brimming over with pride to see their children perform on stage. While this is not evidence for equality, one saw the transformative power of music in action. For a few heartbeats they could see their children excelling; their talents identified, honed, and channeled fruitfully. The purpose of education is precisely this, and the Foundation through its efforts gave us proof that their vision is potentially empowering.

More privileged parents, frustrated with the schooling system of today, talk about alternate ways and encourage their kids to also think out of the box. Rahul Alvares, a Goa-based environmentalist, is one such former kid, who wrote a delightful account of taking a break from school when he was 17. The book, *Free from School* (1999, 2nd edn. 2005), details how Alvares found his true calling of environmentalism by pursuing his interests. As important as Alvares' book is, one always wondered how such a thing would be possible for underprivileged kids whose parents lack personal networks and money, especially since Alvares's interests took him to various corners of the world? Child's Play Foundation, as a charity organization, provides the vital institutional base for underprivileged kids to explore their extracurricular interests, indeed it fosters this.

One could very well ask if, in the ten years of its existence, the Foundation has produced a prodigy, a Mozart or a Beethoven for our times. But that is not exactly the job of the Foundation and it is also not what one should expect from such an organization as the Child's Play. The idea, it seems, is not to create one genius but to allow as many children as possible access to music so that it fosters positive values that are useful as adult members of the society. For, if a society structured as ours is, to reward accidents of birth, and thereby takes away opportunities from most of the children, a radical act of correction would be to create those very opportunities to those who do not have any.

Therein lies the lesson. It is important to create opportunities for children so that they can work hard to develop their talents. As a society, it is important for us to recognize that opportunities need to be created both within and outside the schools. The educational system in India only rewards individual merit of those who are already equipped with systemic privilege and cutthroat competition. But as Dr. Dias recognizes, the solution lies in the privileged working at democratizing access to opportunities. Fortunately, we do not need time to tell us if such a vision will be successful on a wider level. The pride felt by the parents of Child's Play children itself shows that, in their small way, the Foundation has already made

a difference.



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