Computer skills helping youth reclaim their lives

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The Uddami project which began modestly about 10 years ago in its present south Kolkata location
provides computer skills to youths primarily from the surrounding slums, so that they can become technologically empowered as well as learn to become truly self-sufficient.

To get to Uddami Computer Training Centre (UCTC) on Prince Anwar Shah Road, one has to go past a row of tiny kiosks selling vadas, samosas and the ubiquitous kathi rolls. Past a huge, swanky shopping mall with its adjacent multi-storied buildings that point towards the sky like sharpened pencil tips. And there, at the end of a narrow lane, stands a nondescript three-storied building that houses the training centre.

Uddami in Bengali means enterprising. The Uddami Computer Training Centre teaches the young, not-so-privileged in society to find employment by becoming technologically empowered.

Take Rabia Khatoon, for instance. She was brought up in a home run for needy children. Once shy and diffident, today, at 24, Rabia is a project manager with UCTC.

The journey has not been easy. Rabia lost her father when she was around eight years old. She was put in a home so that she would not be a burden on her mother who was trying to cope with the younger children.

"My mother became almost deranged after the death of my father," the young woman recalls. "But I am glad she gave me up because otherwise who knows what would have happened to me. In a way it taught me to take care of myself."

It was at the home, in 1994, that volunteer Alison Saracena began to teach Rabia and the other children. At first, there were regular lessons in English; this was later expanded to include computer basics.

"The idea was to offer equal opportunities to the needy"

The Uddami project began modestly about 10 years ago in its present south Kolkata location. The centre offers free computer classes to young students primarily from the surrounding slums. Most come from homes in which the average monthly earning is Rs 3,000. Their mothers work as domestic help and their fathers are rickshaw-pullers or tea stall owners.

"The idea was to offer equal opportunities to the needy," says Alison who came to India with her husband Bryan Forst looking for "something meaningful" to do. Brian was a software developer in Silicon Valley, in the Bay area.

What struck them both was that opportunities available to the needy in Kolkata were not inclusive. And so, those who receive training at UCTC are further trained to become teachers themselves.

To determine genuinely needy cases, UCTC has framed a detailed questionnaire related to the student's household earnings, his/her and the family's literacy levels and, most importantly, the student's desire to channel the training in a fruitful direction.

As project manager, Rabia takes me to a room crowded with young men and women undergoing basic-to-advanced computer training, depending on their aptitude. A dozen screens are lit up, as instructors teach students MS Word, Excel and Power Point; Cisco Networking is taught over the weekend.

With the help of friends and well-wishers, the centre has evolved over the years. Today, it teaches batches of eight to nine students, in two-hour stints. This roughly translates to three classes, between 12 noon and 8 pm, Mondays to Fridays. The timings are flexible in order to accommodate children who attend school or college. The course used to be a one-year one, now it is six months. It's also open to NGOs that may wish to sponsor children.

If there are challenges in running such a facility, the difficulties faced by the students are greater.

Poonam Karna, also in her early-20s, comes from a very poor family, originally from Bihar. Her father washes taxis to support his wife and six daughters. But with the phasing out of old taxis due to pollution norms made effective in the city lately, he has very few taxis to wash and is also "getting old," Poonam says.

After finishing her graduation at a nearby college, Poonam enrolled in the computer training course, determined to change her life. Spotting her technical prowess, UCTC sponsored her CISCO training in Jaipur. Today, she is an instructor/trainer with UCTC, drawing a salary of Rs 7,000. With this she is able to support the entire family, the burden resting lightly on her frail young shoulders. When asked about marriage, she says: "My mother is no hurry to get me married off. She feels 30 is a good enough age." Although Poonam does not save much from her present earnings, she's satisfied that the family's basic needs are being met.

Rabia too has managed to reclaim her life. She is re-united with her family though she does not stay with them. And she supports her younger siblings. She is in no hurry to get married although she agrees that one day she will, but not at the cost of sacrificing her job. Living in a working women's hostel, she is like any independent city woman earning a living.

Other young students like Khokon Das, Ujit Das and Palash Mondol are gainfully employed at the centre as web developers. A number of students have received job offers from other companies as well.

"The biggest challenge was encouraging the students to think"

Alison decided early on that only teaching computer skills was not good enough. And so English became part of the curriculum, to enable aspirants to improve their communication skills, face job interviews and interact with clients.

Teaching children the rudiments of computers was not the biggest challenge, says Alison. "I would have to say that the biggest challenge was encouraging the students to think. The rote learning method that most education is based on seems to paralyse their minds." Alison strongly believes that creativity is innate in every child, from every strata of society, and must be nurtured.

"It's hard to engage the students in the learning process because they really believe that the teacher knows all, and knows best, which I can tell you from my own experience is not true," she laughs. Nowhere is this more evident than in computer teaching.

The other big issue Alison faces is the fear of failure that almost all the students experience. "This deeply affects their ability to learn how to use the computer, because you have to be willing to try different ways to achieve your goal. Often you fail, but this is how we learn," she says.

UCTC's next project is an ambitious one: an academy for the hearing-impaired. The centre recently hosted a two-week computer workshop for deaf students, taught by deaf teachers. "Our dream is to have an adult education centre run by the deaf, for the deaf, which would not only offer computer classes but other types of classes based on the interests of the deaf community," says Alison.

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