

A Chance to Dream

The Shanti Bhavan Residential School Story, by Shilpa Raj



I was punished for my existence. Born a girl in rural India, I barely escaped the fate met by millions of unnamed female children in poor villages like mine, and I was allowed to live. But in the eyes of my father—a destitute woodcutter—I was as good as nonexistent. I was a burden he chose to shoulder, but his crippling poverty made me invisible to him. My mother silently bore the brunt of his frustration, and every time I saw him mistreat her, I knew that she suffered because of me. The responsibility I felt for her oppression stung me more than the blows he delivered to my body, blows that cried out voicelessly, "Why were you born?"

But I didn't remain a burden to him forever. At the age of four, he gave me up to [Shanti Bhavan](#), a residential school in the state of Tamil Nadu founded by [Abraham George](#) with the mission to provide the opportunity of a better life for children from socially and economically deprived backgrounds. My father's duty to bring me up ended there. I stepped onto the soil of this institution without the slightest idea of how drastically my life was going to change. Fourteen years later, having lived that change, here I am, a young woman with a clear vision of her future and a voice of her own. Today, when I hear the same man who once rejected me say, "Shilpa, my hopes are on you," I cannot help but wonder what has made this difference—why he now recognizes me for who I am regardless of my gender.

And yet the answer is as clear as the tears on my mother's face: acceptance and education at Shanti Bhavan. This institution helped erase my ignorance as an illiterate person through a unique education—an education not confined to the pages of a textbook; an education demanding open-mindedness and free thinking; an education not tainted by prejudices based on gender, caste, creed, or social status. But most importantly, this school has set the foundation for a fruitful future with the promise of both professional and personal success for me.

At Shanti Bhavan I interact with dedicated teachers and volunteers from all over the world who want to be a part of this mission in their own way, and this exposure to their diverse lives and cultures has widened my perspective on life. Being encouraged to question explanations with a critical eye and form my own opinions has helped me cultivate fluency in free thinking. Reading the books of writers from Shakespeare to Tolstoy has revealed the world and the complexities of man through different windows.

Yet having personally risen from the shackles of poverty, I cannot remain indifferent to the situation faced by millions of poor children who continue to waste away in the clutches of poverty. I am aware that the government has taken measures to provide free education in state-run schools for its young citizens. But having interacted with my own siblings and the children from surrounding villages who are a product of this education, I find myself questioning what it has brought them.

Seated on the cement floors of their undersized classrooms, bent over their slates, these children must take the word of their teachers as final without question. Their knowledge is limited to poorly written textbooks and inexperienced teachers who come from similar educational backgrounds themselves. Unfortunately, the government fails to provide qualified teachers and ensure that they come regularly to conduct classes. Taught in the medium of their regional dialects, these students are deprived of the opportunity to learn functional English, which is essential for professional success. With poor education and inadequate skills, the students graduating from state-run schools are unable to seek higher education in quality institutions or obtain jobs that pay well.

My economics classes have kept me informed about the activities of developmental thinkers like experts at the World Bank and elsewhere who have set goals such as literacy and primary school attendance, which seem to be the common yardsticks of educational progress.

But those who acquire these minimal skills cannot compete for employment in today's highly technological marketplace. I cannot help but wonder what these low standards offer poor children beyond subsistence in their adult life. I understand that globalization impacts the prosperity of nations, technological advancement, trade, and investments, but I am not certain these terms carry much meaning for my siblings and their friends back home. Do they have an opportunity to participate in the benefits of globalization without a good education? To me, the answer is a definite "no."

If there is to be equity in this world, the poor must also reap the fruits of globalization. Today it appears to me that globalization is helping the rich get richer, leaving more than half of the world's population mere spectators. These deprived and uneducated people should not remain as cheap labor to be used for the benefit of a few. Thus globalization must occur in a fair and equitable fashion, affording opportunity for everyone, rich and poor alike, to take part. To deny that by setting low achievement standards is simply unethical and a disservice to the poor.

I stand at a crossroads with the poor in India, but given the opportunities that Shanti Bhavan has provided for me, our paths will differ. While I hold dreams of a future free from poverty's tyranny, millions of others remain slaves to their unchanging destiny. I dream of uplifting my family from poverty; I dream of a better tomorrow in which the stains of illiteracy and ignorance will be erased. I want to see a future where all children, regardless of the social status of their families, can aspire for a better life with dignity. An ethical global system must ensure that everyone receives the quality education that is their human right.

As for me, I am studying hard for the national exams in March. With good results I plan to continue my studies at a prestigious college and become a journalist and a writer. I haven't told my father yet as he expects me to become a doctor or lawyer. But my schooling at Shanti Bhavan has instilled in me the self-confidence and determination to walk down a path that no one among the few educated in my village has yet to tread.

Shilpa Raj is in twelfth grade at [Shanti Bhavan Residential School](#) for children from economically and socially deprived families, mostly of the [Dalit](#) community (formerly called "untouchables") in India.



This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons License](#). Please read our [usage policy](#).

Read More: [Charity](#), [Culture](#), [Development](#), [Education](#), [Gender](#), [Globalization](#), [Human Rights](#), [Jobs](#), [Poverty](#), [India](#), [Asia](#)

[Tweet](#)

© 2012 Policy Innovations, All Rights Reserved.