

Teaching the way

By: Janaki Viswanathan **Date:** 2009-11-15 **Place:** Mumbai

It's the little achievements that matter, say three Teach For India Fellows



It's unusually quiet for a school, but then recess is still an hour away at Dadar's Maharashtra High School 2, where Teach For India has a tie-up. The recruits or Fellows of this non-profit organisation teach at lower-economic schools for two years.

The students at Maharashtra High School are mostly children of weavers, housekeepers, taxi drivers and milkmen and come from the single-room chawl system. In the last two classrooms, each with 30 students no more than three-feet high, everyone is talking at once.

In one, Romana Shaikh, 21, patiently goes through subtraction sums. In the other, Ivan Dias, also in his 20s, is taking a class in punctuation. He addresses every child by name as he responds to queries in a heavy American accent. On spotting us, the students shriek in excitement. Dias starts a countdown from five to one and they settle somewhat. "Works every time," he says with a smile.

Fellows with TFI

Sheikh and Dias have been Fellows with TFI since July. They've taken a month-long course and will be teachers here for two years. While Sheikh is a psychology graduate who dabbled in public relations, US-born Dias is living in India for the first time.

Both teach Class 2 students all subjects, except Hindi and Marathi. School is from 12.30 to 5.30 pm, but they spend the rest of their time with extra classes, planning lessons and community projects (TFI Fellows identify a problem in their community and figure out ways to solve it). And their faces break into sunny smiles as they talk of their students.



Ivan Dias and Romana Sheikh

Beyond duty



Kanika Saraf

For Kanika Saraf, another TFI Fellow at Jaafri's School, Govandi, the day doesn't end too. She's on call for her students 24X7. "Once a child called me late at night to say she was being beaten up," she says. The problem is that the parents don't consider education to be of any value. "Parents believe that once they've sent kids to school, their responsibility ends," says Saraf. But in the few months that she's been there, the 21-year-old has managed to bring about a change in attitude among the staff and principal. "They're more open to our methods of teaching which involve an incentive." Saraf had promised that those who scored high marks in mathematics would be treated to pizzas at her home. "Ten students are coming over next week," she says.

In the four months that Sheikh and Dias have been teaching, they've reduced the number of fights between students. In a bid to make 'school' a less daunting place, students are given more freedom. "We don't carry threatening scales. We give them high-fives after school. Our students aren't afraid of us," explains Dias.

Life changing experience

Sheikh says that being a Fellow is a life-transforming experience: "Integrity matters a lot more. You can't wake up one morning and say, I'm too lazy to go to work." For Dias, it's taxing, but very satisfying. Saraf says, "The way I live, think, the way I perceive life, even money, has changed. It felt like an Utopian concept initially, this whole education equity, but it's possible. We are addressing a real issue here."



Class 2 students from Maharashtra High School 2
pics/Nimesh Dave

Back in Maharashtra High School, it's finally recess time and we're in the corridor, the children going shutter-crazy with the photographer. One girl, spectacles sliding off her nose, skips up to Sheikh with a vague complaint: "Didi, he is beating him in the eye." Sheikh turns to beam proudly at me: "That she can frame that sentence is a big deal, a really big deal."

If you're interested in becoming a Teach For India Fellow, apply online at <http://www.teachforindia.org/>.

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