



Shoma Bakre with children at a school in Bengaluru

Accidental Entrepreneur, Enterprising Social Activist

From daughter of post-partition refugees to an English teacher, to an MBA degree in the US, to selling her company to a multinational for a few million dollars and switching gears to immerse deep into social work, **Shoma Bakre, 45**, indeed has had a dream ride. The heady combo of finely honed entrepreneurship skills, financial stability and a burning desire to do good, is driving Shoma to take the plunge in the social development sector. Already, her initiative in education for underprivileged children has attracted 25 organizations with diverse interests, including large businesses. She knows that she has it in her to make an impact, especially in women and children related causes. Here's an edited excerpt of her chat with **ManagementNext**



Assam to Bangalore via US

While growing up I had no vision of becoming an entrepreneur. I started off with teaching English in a college in Assam and moved to the US after marriage and got my MBA there. I worked in Applied Materials in the corporate training group for a while.

When we came back to India in late 2003, I didn't have any idea what I would do except that I would stay home with my children and enjoy a couple of years of life in India. A friend who was on a visit from the US mentioned there was a huge opportunity in outsourced research and asked if I would like to do consulting from home. That's how we started as an offshore business research company. We were at the right time and right place – internet and outsourcing had just taken off. It was serendipity that I got into this business.

We were four partners, two in India and two in the US. I managed operations in India. It was very hard; the only thing driving me was my desire to complete what we had started was very strong and there was no room for abandoning anything mid-way. I had never done a business or a start-up until then, and here I was setting up operations. I was new to Bangalore, everything was a challenge.

But we were lucky as we acquired very good clients in the US early on and so there was no looking back. Luckily we did not need any funding or investments and when we sold the company we owned 100 per cent of the equity and had no debt.

Decision to Change Course

The company was seven years old, we had 400 employees, and we were doing very well servicing clients all across the globe. We had reached a certain stage from where to take it to the next level we had to run on the treadmill even faster. Did we want to do this? I was the first to raise my hand to say, no!

The reason being, my strong belief that if we were doing good work, we should only do better and my stage in life should not affect the growth of the company. I felt if we could find a competent company that could take it to the next level I would be willing to step down. **I could let it go provided our company went into good hands.**

Since day one when we hired people, we never defaulted on payments; salaries went on the first of every month, and perfection in everything was very important for me. I did not want to go to a stage

where, after we had 400 employees, and so many people's lives that we were touching, and being responsible for their bread and butter, we could not provide them with further prospects. In my mind, we could move only upwards, we couldn't afford to stagnate. If we partners pushed ourselves, of course, we could take the organization to the next level **but the question was did I want to commit to more than what I already had done?**

I realized that my family was getting totally neglected. I asked myself if I really needed more money, power or fame – these were not the reason why I had got into entrepreneurship. Therefore, the answer in my mind was a categorical “no” and the decision to change the course of my career was easy to make. Thankfully my partners also felt the need to exit and we got acquired by Genpact in 2011.

I used to take care of multiple functions at my company and as soon as I decided to exit I started grooming people so that the transition would be smooth. We had a small CSR arm too and we were always socially inclined as a company.

Transitioning wasn't an issue, being able to sell the company gave me my opportunity to fulfill my long harbored desire to work in the development sector.

Let's Do Some Good

I wanted to create a platform for collaboration. I thought I will provide the 'connect' where people can collaborate and work well. Initially it was just a platform on Facebook, which called for projects in areas of education and employability of underprivileged children; women empowerment at the grassroots level; health and sanitation. Along with Samridhdhi Trust, we formed the Bangalore Effective Education Task Force (BEETF), which now comprises of 25 partners, corporates, NGOs and individuals, who expressed interest in collaborating for our common goals. In March, this year, we started our flagship project called Bridging Gaps in Education. We rolled out our Bridge Education Program in four government schools and currently 600+ children are enrolled. Manipal Foundation is our partner and

we have a strong MOU signed with the Education Department to be able to work within the public school system in Bangalore. **Our goal is to put all “out of school children” in Bangalore into school within five years.**

Most of the volunteers for my foundation are my ex-colleagues, friends and neighbors who are interested in doing some good. I am also very actively involved with social work in my community where we do work for the benefit of female domestic workers by running camps for them in financial literacy, safety, security, health and hygiene. I am very passionate about livelihood skills for women and health and sanitation and I hope to take on some projects in this area in the coming year.

My ambition is not to create a big NGO, that's not the idea at all. My desire is to do most impactful work at the lowest possible cost by mobilizing more and more people to give back to society, in whatever big or small ways they can. My pillar of strength, my husband, has been very supportive through all this.

What I like to do is create things, create processes, give them shape and life and then place them in capable hands, who can run them because of the solid foundation that has been laid. My strength lies there, I am able to envision and translate ideas into tangible outcomes.

The learning so far has been great. I have tried to apply corporate principles to the nonprofit sector. It is very important especially if you have large corporate partners. If you aren't able to articulate crisply, transparently and credibly then the chances of success are very low.

I think if you commit and give anything your 200%, it will surely happen. If you treat all things that you work on – whether small or big – with equal sincerity, dedication and commitment, the outcome of all your endeavors can be nothing but great.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvEupchrOvA>