

INTERVIEW WITH BHAGYA RANGACHAR, FOUNDER AND MANAGING TRUSTEE, CLT INDIA



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Technology has to be light, appropriate and cost-effective. Content has to be relevant and mapped to the classroom teaching. Measures to track usage and learning gaps as well as achievements should be in place. Without these in place, programs are incomplete and may not succeed.”
- “It excites me every time I visit a faraway classroom and hear stories about how our efforts have brought a shift in classrooms; in the way teaching is imparted and students engage more, how they have learnt to enjoy science more with illustrated experiments and how this has reduced students dropping out in many places.”

Could you please describe where you currently work and what your responsibilities are?

I am the Founder and Managing Trustee of CLT India (registered as Children’s LoveCastles Trust). I served as a CEO until September 2021. This year, CLT is running for its 25th year! Although, we were the first organization to implement school mid-day meals formally in the State, within five years of setting up the organization, we had forayed into technology-aided teaching in government schools, an after-school technology center, an Intel Computer Clubhouse, and a Teachers’ Resource Centre.

This facilitated a process for many teachers to help us develop a large repository of NCERT-based digital STEM content in regional languages with low-cost technology delivery models and data analytics to track usage from individual dashboard. The body of our work has been to bridge the gap of missed learning opportunities in STEM in rural schools due to teacher shortages and lack of learning resources in regional languages as well as poor infrastructure.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Bhagya Rangachar, Founder and Managing Trustee, CLT India, discusses some of her experiences with digitalization in education. The interview is part of a series on that topic.

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We addressed the challenge by developing curricula-based digital STEM content in regional languages and in English; and leveraging technology for distribution and scale. The recent launch of two mobile APPs in Google Play Store, Jigi and Jigi Jigi was to further amplify the efforts to give access to quality resources on personal devices in under-served communities. This also had a focus on addressing school shutdowns for two years during COVID and enabling students to continue learning.

CLT has won many awards, including – two Millennium Alliance Awards by FICCI and USAID for low-cost innovation in e-learning, and a Digital India award from the Times Group. CNBC 18 recently showcased CLT as one of the leading change makers in the country. Personally, I was fortunate to be listed as one of 100 women in the book, 'Phenomenal She' by Indian National Bar Association and recognized as one of the 50 Globally Listed Social Innovators on World CSR Day 2017. I was also featured in another book – "Celebrating Women – Stories of Courage, Stories to Inspire: by FICCI in 2021.

You have several Rotarians interviewed as part of this series on education and digitalization. I am not a Rotarian, but Rotary has been one of our key partners with the implementation of setting up Digital Classrooms for more than 10 years. We value the strength Rotary brings with their network of experts, their dedication to serve, and ability to scale.

What has been challenging?

Indian Schools teach in many different State languages and follow different syllabi for each State as well. So, the first five years of our work was to bring 'Master Teachers' from around the nation to put together a framework for pedagogy that was based on a national curriculum and then customized to digital modules in many regional languages. Even then, when the textbooks keep changing every couple of years, teachers panic, although the pedagogy is the same. Still, our team has to remap the lessons and remotely upgrade the content in 4,800 rural and remote schools – our current reach. Other major challenges include frequent power cuts in the villages and no internet connectivity. We countered these challenges by making technology simple and light, solar-powered when it was required, and making content accessible without the need for access to the internet.

What do you think more generally are the opportunities from digitalization for K12 education?

The very challenges I have listed above - teacher shortages, inequity in learning opportunities in under-served communities, replication of content into many regional languages, lack of student engagement due to rote learning, to name a few - all these are opportunities to bring localized solutions and leverage technology.



Photo: One of the CLT program at work.



Photo: more than 10,000 volunteer hours have been utilized to deliver 4,000 STEM kits to schools.

And what do you see as the main challenges?

My personal challenge when I started to conceptualize our flagship program, e-Patashale, was setting the right expectations. The initiative was not meant to replace black-board teacher-led teaching. The aim was to enhance the learning experience for children and strengthen the skills of teachers to navigate additional material, and expose them to good methodologies and pedagogy. We also wanted to make sure the graphics in the applications were not overdone, unnecessarily crowding the screen, yet dynamic. This was a totally new shift for rural government schools.

Do you know of other experiences that were innovative, and which may have inspired you?

There were many, but most were pockets of excellence or expertise in one area. By contrast, e-Patashale was holistically designed and evolved over many years, so that it was scalable and sustainable for remote and under-served schools. We didn't separate content from implementation challenges. It was all integral to the success of the program.

Do you know of experiences that did not work so well and could provide lessons on what to avoid?

Technology has to be light, appropriate and cost-effective. Content has to be relevant and mapped to the classroom teaching. Measures to track usage and learning gaps as well as achievements should be in place. Without these in place, programs are incomplete and may not succeed.

What was your own journey? How did you end up in your current position?

I worked as a software professional in the U.S. for more than 18 years. This didn't necessarily make me an expert, but it gave me a perspective on how technology could be leveraged to solve a problem at scale and to build a team to design and develop course-ware that would bring in low-cost technologies for social innovation.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

It excites me every time I visit a faraway classroom and hear stories about how our efforts have brought a shift in classrooms; in the way teaching is imparted and students engage more, how they have learnt to enjoy science more with illustrated experiments and how this has reduced students dropping out in many places. It is the transformation of each village classroom that moves me. It is 'Learning with a Difference' in each of the 14,000 plus classrooms that is happening that motivates me to do more!