

A class act

With the BMC's announcement to 'rebrand' municipal schools in order to bring them at par with private educational institutes, experts say the changes need to go beyond a new name

ANJUMASKERI AND PALLAVI SMART

DEEPAK Phalekar, who works as an electrician at the Mumbai Port Trust, has enrolled his children, Yukta, a Class VIII student, and Malhar, in Class III, at Wadibunder Mumbai Public School in Mazgaon. His eldest daughter, Arya, studied at a private school in the city, but the frequent and arbitrary fee hikes and hyper commercialisation compelled Phalekar to consider a municipal school for his younger kids. "The learning now happens not only in the classroom, but also beyond its walls. And it's made education more affordable. As a parent, I see my kids enjoying their time at school," he tells mid-day. The school is run by non-profit Akanksha Foundation, which uses MCGM infrastructure to provide quality teaching to students from underprivileged communities. Similarly, Asema, Muktangam and 321 Education Foundation are also successfully running schools in partnership with the MCGM.

Phalekar's feedback is backed by statistics. According to Raju Tadv, BMC education officer, over 18,000 new students have enrolled in BMC

schools in the new academic year. "From 2,63,360 [students] last year to 2,82,276 this year is proof that BMC's approach is reaping results," says Tadv. Cashing in on the momentum, the civic body has floated a new proposal worth ₹12 crore that includes putting signboards and gates in seven zones covering all municipal school buildings. There will now be a new standardised colour system for all schools under the rebranded Mumbai Public School (MPS) umbrella. In February 2020, the civic general body had cleared a proposal of renaming civic schools as MPS. The decision was taken in order to change the image of municipal schools and attract more students as the numbers had been seeing a decline.

While Phalekar's children are taught as per the curriculum designed by the state, civic schools will now offer non-state board curriculums such as ICSE, CBSE, and even Cambridge. "The BMC is the first civic body in the country to offer non-state board curriculums in such a variety. This has been a brainchild of Minister of Tourism and Environment Aditya Thackeray who wants civic schools to be at par with any other private schools in the city by focusing on the quality of education, infrastructure and creating a conducive environment for extra-curricular activities," shares Sainath Durge, member of the BMC Education Committee. While there are 11 CBSE and one ICSE schools functioning under the BMC umbrella, the one affiliated to the Cambridge Board will be launched next year. This year, around 10,000 applications were received for a total of 3,849 seats in these 12 schools. Tadv owes the higher enrolment to the dedication and commitment shown



Children at a BMC school run by non-profit Akanksha Foundation, which uses MCGM infrastructure to provide quality teaching to students from low-income communities. The school model also includes parents as partners



The new Pratiksha Nagar BMC School at Sion. The school will start operations after the state's green signal to reopen primary schools. PIC/PRADEEP DHIVAR

by teachers during the pandemic. "Our set-up of online learning has been replicated by various Zilla Parishad (ZP) schools across Maharashtra. We have collaborated with NGOs who have expertise in the education sector." Speaking with mid-day, Ajit Kumbhar, Joint Commissioner, Education, BMC, said that the corporation has completed major repair work in 171 school buildings, with 32 new structures being built and 98 repair projects currently underway. "A new logo has been designed for all civic schools. And a total of 326 new gates have been installed too." This, he believes, will create a feeling of belongingness among students and a sense of uniformity. "We are also looking into details by instituting a committee to choose classroom furniture that is age-appropriate and comfortable to use for long hours."

The idea is to induce a change in perception, believes Francis Joseph, president of SLN Network, an independent professional network of school leaders, and core member of the committee working under the Mumbai Public School brand of civic education in the city. He says the process will kickstart with changing the structure of the school buildings, by taking into account students' safety and health. Nitin Dalvi from Mahim, who

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Pranav Iyer



'public schools' rub off on civic-run schools. "There is no harm in doing so, but if this is not the first step of a complete audit and overhaul of these schools in terms of standards and facilities, it will be cosmetic. Municipal schools are the last line of defence against illiteracy, and to bring their standards up holistically is a noble goal. Renaming them, not so much." The concentration of the narrative on the amount being spent is largely immaterial, he thinks. "In my opinion, spend 10 times more if you like, but bring in a set of standards for the schools in terms of facilities and faculty. This way, they will rebrand themselves." The current perception of municipal schools is two rooms, one teacher, and the mid-day meal being the main attraction for parents, observes Iyer. "While there's nothing wrong with that, we can improve the facilities and faculty, by focusing on identifying gifted children to move on towards quality higher education. The strength of municipal schools, after all, is their aura of inclusiveness and their accessibility."

A few years ago, Saurabh Taneja, CEO of The Akanksha Foundation, was one of the NGO representatives roped in to guide a committee that was set up by environment minister Aditya Thackeray and BMC officials to find ways to better the level of education at civic schools. One of the recommendations that Taneja had submitted was to introduce classes starting from junior kindergarten right up to Class X. "We felt that this shift would encourage parents to send their children to BMC schools. Right now, after Class VII or VIII, children have to find another balwadi or a secondary school to complete their education. This change would ease the burden on parents." The integrated approach at the English-medium Mumbai

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Public Schools of offering kindergarten to Class X under one roof is one of the reasons for its success, he feels. "We also requested for greater autonomy for the principal to be able to make the decisions instead of following top-down orders." In a post-pandemic world, Taneja thinks the thrust should be on how to retrain the teachers in making up for learning loss and bridging the socio-emotional needs of children.

A fine example of a turnaround in the quality of education by civic schools is evident in Delhi government's Chunauti campaign, thinks Prashant Jain, CEO at Oswaal Books, one of the leading publishers of educational books in India. The national capital's once-forgotten government school system underwent a rehaul in 2016. "The government, which has been in charge of education since 2015, introduced new teacher-training courses and provided generous resources to improve ailing schooling infrastructure. They also introduced a happiness curriculum with a variety of innovative classroom learning tools to give the classroom experience a major facelift." The Chunauti programme was initiated to put a check on the dropout rate and improve the quality of education with a special focus on the weakest students. In the subsequent version of the scheme, Chunauti 2018, students from Class VI to VIII were



The revamped BMC classroom and play area at Sumer Nagar BMC School in Borivli

mapped and their learning levels enhanced.

There's no dearth of success stories of government-run schools globally. The Obama Administration launched a four-pronged strategy specifically to turn around Low Performing Public Schools, as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. "By using the 'turnaround, restart, transformation, and school closure approach', where

18,000

Number of new students who've enrolled in BMC schools this academic year, according to the education officer



depending on the nature of low performance, different strategies were implemented for improving Public School Education in the USA," shares Iyer, adding, that the most significant improvement in school performances was seen in low performing public schools in the Chicago Metropolitan Area. Taneja suggests we can even look beyond the West and take a leaf out of Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam that has left education policymakers around the world marvelling at its success in access to general education and learning outcomes. This, despite the country's relatively low level of economic development. The government has reportedly devoted between 15-20 per cent of its entire spending budget to education

since the late 1990s, remaining at 20 per cent over the past five years. The first Education for All (EFA) action plan saw the country make impressive strides in the areas of universal primary education and gender equality, while the second EFA plan built on the momentum by turning the focus to quality universal lower-secondary education. "Vietnam is not comparable to India in terms of size, but perhaps GDP and per capita income, yes. Their ability to transform the quality of education at government schools by investing in school infrastructure and encouraging teachers to use more engaging student-centred classroom methods, is noteworthy," says Taneja.

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Deepak Phalekar, who works as an electrician at the Mumbai Port Trust, enrolled his children Yukta and Malhar at the Wadibunder Mumbai Public School in Mazgaon, as he got fed up with the frequent and arbitrary fee hikes at a private school



Nitin Dalvi from Mahim withdrew his son's admission from an ICSE board school in Dadar to an ICSE-affiliated civic school in Mahalaxmi

The colour of money

As part of a German arts company's project on white funds for art commissioned from the Global South, an Indian theatre artiste will present a humanistic idea of money

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY



ANUJA GHOSALKAR

ANUJA Ghosalkar, who divides her time between Bengaluru and Mumbai, has since 2015 practised a form of documentary theatre that focuses on personal and oral histories, archives and materials, exploring subjects like technology, gender and intimacy while breaking the hegemony of the playwright, the director and the actor in conventional theatrical practice. Her Bengaluru-based theatre company Drama Queen through well-travelled shows like Lady Anandi—about her great-grandfather, a female impersonator in late 19th century Marathi theatre and narrated using archival photos as projections on her body—and workshops have sought to build audiences and the language of documentary theatre in India, a form borrowed from



Ghosalkar says that the notes are quite dense, themselves becoming objects of art. PIC COURTESY/DEBANSHU BHAUMIK

the German theatrical tradition. Ghosalkar is also the curator of the popular Lonely Hearts Club on Instagram which invited recordings of erotica from listeners, her attempt being to subvert the algorithm of Instagram, encouraging people to listen instead of being driven purely by the visual. Earlier this month, supported by the Goethe-Institut Mumbai, contributors to the club performed virtually on Zoom exploring issues around online erotica and voyeurism among other things.

Next month, Ghosalkar will be participating along with five other international artistes in Ber-

lin-based performing arts company Filmm Works' White Money project, devoted to the theme of money that flows from Europe to fund artists in the Global South, requiring them to cater to orientalist or exotic images of non-white cultures and thereby reinforcing racist and neo-colonial structures. "It is an idea whose time has come because museums across the world are trying to decolonise their wares," she tells us over a telephonic call. "The moment is right to think about money and its politics."

Ghosalkar like many, has had a troubled equation with such funding. "Of course, I have been funded by white money," she says, which

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itself has often proved insufficient. But there is also the matter of facing rejections from Indian funders because her work has not been perceived as Indian enough. Despite her own rootedness in her culture, Ghosalkar's practice has been associated with a western aesthetic. Moreover, her work at an arts foundation from 2008 to 2013, sanctioning grants to other artists, gave her an understanding of the self-seeking nature of this relationship. "I have been on the other side and understand the power relation between money and art," she says. "[This project] was a way of reflecting on those five years where my voice was being blunted."

"I started with the idea that I, as a woman artist have agency whether I get white, brown or black money, and I wanted to exercise it as a performance maker," she says explaining how artists too are often complicit in their own victimisation given the way they are forced to present themselves, network and write proposals. Her project, whose working title is Double Agent X/I Promise the Bearer, and for which she is seeking funding to show in India after its Berlin

opening, will look at currency as the greatest fiction that human civilisation has bought into. While it will playfully present her story as an artist and share her interactions with her mother, dog, lover, guru, and funders, at the heart of it are fictional currency notes that she will make on stage using a print-making process called the woodcut, tracing them using the technique of frottage. These are designed on recycled paper carrying the image of a woman, says Ghosalkar mysteriously, reluctant to give away too much. They also bear traces of an imaginary republic, which has echoes in philosophy, emojis of lips and the saying 'I promise the bearer of this note a human interaction if we meet serendipitously', along with lyrics of pop songs, quotes from economists and of acclaimed German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin.

"The notes are quite dense, themselves becoming objects of art," she observes. Moreover, their tactility works in tandem with the fact that they will form a part of a physical show after nearly two years of virtual performances.

The notes will be handed over to the audience in the end urging them to buy the other a drink, hold their hand and give them a hug when they encounter one another again. "I hope the promise of this humanism is carried through [in the performance]," says Ghosalkar. "That is the promise of this fiction."

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SAINATH DURGE



FRANCIS JOSEPH



Saurabh Taneja, CEO of The Akanksha Foundation, had recommended the BMC and Aadiya Thackeray to introduce classes starting from junior kindergarten right up to Class X to encourage enrolments



Mumbai public School CBSE at Chiku Wadi, Borivli West. PIC/NIMESH DAVE; (right) Environment minister Aadiya Thackeray at the launch of the school

