

INNOVATION @ GRASSROOTS

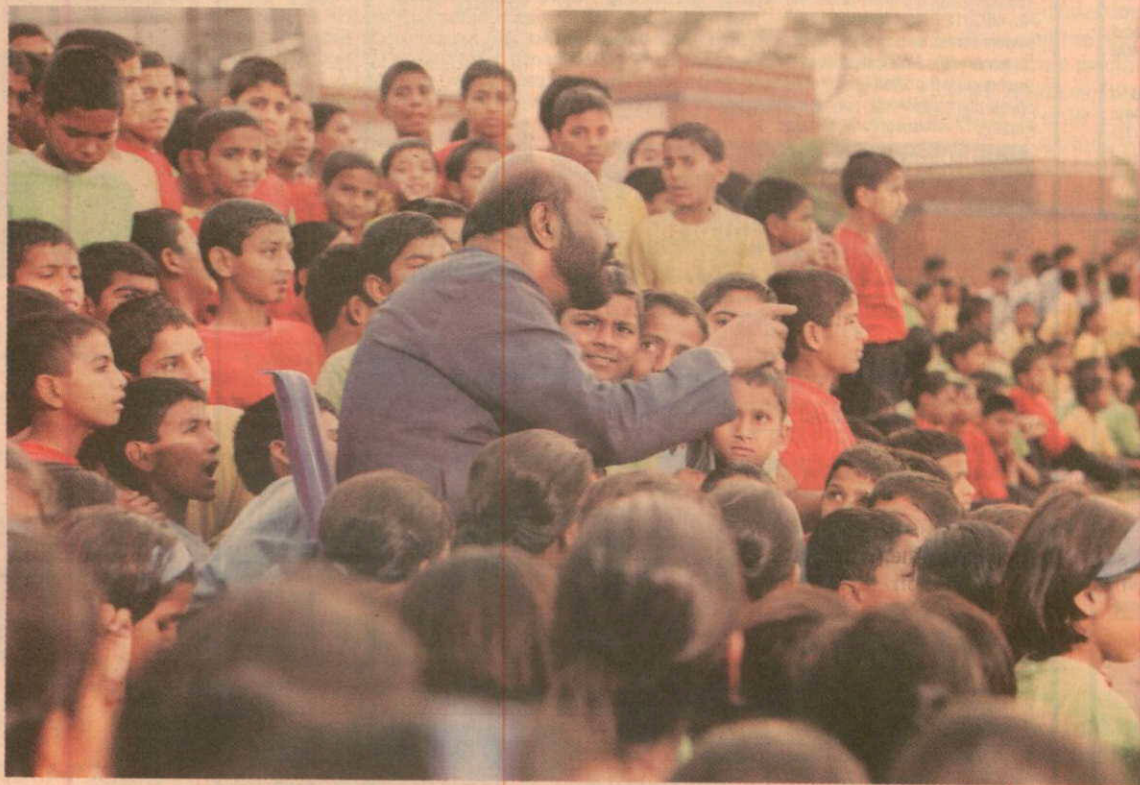
Shiv Nadar often says that he is a product of education. Through his philanthropic arm, the founder and chairman of the \$6.2 billion, 100,000 people-strong HCL Group is doing what he believes is closest to his heart—to build future leaders from rural India via free high quality school education. A unique social experiment, under the direct supervision of his daughter Roshni, is presently underway at two schools in Bulandshahr and Sitapur in UP, that addresses social imbalances and envisions nurturing and creating leaders who would be the inspiration and role models for their families, communities and society at large. A ground report from the rural heartland

Sudhir Chowdhary

DULHERA is a dusty, non-descript village in Bulandshahr district, Uttar Pradesh, 72 km from the national capital and difficult to locate even on your smartphone's mobile app. Given its remoteness, it's hard to believe that a major educational initiative is underway in this West UP village that is shaping some of the brightest rural children into role models for their families, communities and society at large. VidyaGyan Leadership Academy, established by the Shiv Nadar Foundation, is not just another school for the underprivileged; it is home to around 800-odd creative minds who are being mentored and nurtured with a definite objective—to become ambassadors of the school and make changes in the communities they come from and drive a force multiplier impact of transformation.

"VidyaGyan is a truly radical concept," says Shiv Nadar, founder and chairman—HCL, Shiv Nadar Foundation. "It is a social experiment in nurturing leadership from among highly gifted rural poor children in Uttar Pradesh. It provides them the finest mentoring and nurturing to give them the opportunity to become tomorrow's leaders," says the restless, passionate and a creative institution builder who also likes to quote Intel's Andy Grove by stating "only the paranoid survive."

The VidyaGyan schools, one of the flagship initiatives of the Shiv Nadar Foundation, provide free education



HCL founder and chairman Shiv Nadar interacting with some of his creating minds

to some of the brightest rural students, through teaching methodologies, academic vigour and world-class facilities which are at par with the country's best schools. VidyaGyan currently has over 1,200 students at two schools in Bulandshahr and Sitapur in UP. Last week, the schools completed three years of successful operations to create future leaders from India's rural heartland. The Shiv Nadar Foundation plans to build three VidyaGyan schools in Uttar Pradesh, which would finally have around 4,200 students.

"My father is a product of education. It is his way of giving back to society," says Roshni Nadar Malhotra, executive-director & CEO, HCL Corporation and Trustee, Shiv Nadar Foundation. Roshni, who is the

daughter of HCL founder, brings a global outlook, strategic vision and passion for social enterprise and institution-building to her varied roles at HCL and the Shiv Nadar Foundation. She is the driving force behind the VidyaGyan schools, an initiative which she calls "social investment and a radical idea to transform meritorious rural children from economically challenged backgrounds." As a representative of the Foundation, she has also been involved in a joint initiative with the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation to promote the education of the Dalit and Muslim girl child in some of the most backward districts of Uttar Pradesh.

There is no doubt that Shiv Nadar has made HCL an engine of invention by turning dreams—especially entre-

preneurial—into reality. Under his leadership, HCL revolutionised Indian technology and product innovation with many world firsts to its credit—the first, 8-bit microprocessor-based computer in 1978, the first relational database management in 1983 before some of its global peers, client-server architecture in 1984, world's first fine-grained multiprocessor UNIX installation in 1989, among others. A pioneer in remote infrastructure management, HCL was instrumental in implementing and managing the infrastructure backbone of one of India's tallest financial institutions—the National Stock Exchange. HCL Technologies, which spun out of HCL's R&D unit, is currently a leading IT services company in India and a leading global player in



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Roshni Nadar Malhotra
Executive-director & CEO, HCL

engineering and R&D services.

In 1994, Shiv Nadar established what he was believed was closest to his heart—the philanthropic Shiv Nadar Foundation and created its first initiative in Chennai, the SSN Institutions, that is a top ranked engineering college. Today the Foundation is a significant driver of social change and transformational education through its institutions spanning the entire education spectrum from schools to universities. The Shiv Nadar University is a young and a unique research-led interdisciplinary university established in 2011 at Greater Noida; the Shiv Nadar School—a K12 initiative envisions to set up 25 schools in the next 10 years. So far, the Foundation has invested ₹1,800-crore

in its various activities.

"VidyaGyan, an innovation in school education, reaches out to the top of the bottom of the pyramid and creates leaders from across the cross-section of the society," says Saurav Adhikari, senior advisor at Shiv Nadar Foundation. "These students have aspirations but are trapped by economic constraints. At VidyaGyan, these brilliant minds are nurtured and empowered with knowledge to become the leaders of tomorrow."

VidyaGyan has a methodical selection process to handpick potential talent from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds from across the state of Uttar Pradesh. Children from rural background with an annual household income of not more than ₹1 lakh and those who have topped Class 5 Junior State Examination and have studied in a rural government school for at least three consecutive years are shortlisted to appear in the entrance exam, administered by VidyaGyan in partnership with UP government.

"Corporate philanthropy is new in India and we cannot replace the government's efforts," says Adhikari, who is also president and global head for corporate strategy at HCL. "We are different from other initiatives in the sense that we purchase the land at market rates and build the infrastructure facilities. The Foundation is developing a technology driven primary school programme in collaboration with HCL, 'Shiksha', currently being tested in rural UP, in partnership with the government," he adds.

The curriculum at VidyaGyan is reviewed at regular intervals and changes are made accordingly. "We believe that teaching our students to communicate fluently in English is important for preparing them to become future leaders. Along with special courses in English language, imparting computer education is also vital. Our students benefit from the computer labs (fully equipped with internet, printers and scanners) for learning and research activities," says Adhikari.

The Foundation's relentless efforts are bearing fruit and a confident and beaming student fraternity is testimony to that. "I always dreamt of becoming an Indian Air Force pilot, now I know that I can," says Rahul Kundan, a 13-year-old student of eighth class student of VidyaGyan. He was one of his school's toppers at Jalaun in Kanpur district. "Education is quite tech-oriented and imparted through video conferencing, audio-visual classes, projection systems and computer labs," he informs. Says Sonia Singh, a 14-year-old student of ninth class, "It is a wonderful school with practical learning of concepts with the aid of modern classrooms and science and mathematics labs. I want to become a doctor and directly impact thousands and tens-of-thousands of lives over the long-term."

There is no doubt that VidyaGyan provides these children free, world-class education to help transcend the disadvantages they face and compete with their urban counterparts. The Foundation's unique initiative to create future leaders from India's rural heartland is praise-worthy. But can it be a blueprint for Indian education system due to its multiplier effect, and successfully help bridge the urban-rural divide remains to be seen.