

Poverty-slayer steers poor on path of learning

MOHUAJAS
Up close with the man who rose from the depths of poverty to transform the neglected interiors of Odisha by giving their children an opportunity to craft a better future. A day spent with the 50-year-old founder of the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) and Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS).

First impressions

Achyuta Samanta has a unique gait. He glides past you taking five steps a second and is impossible to keep pace with. I decide not to walk, the talk, but wait for the man to set down in his office after his morning ritual, which begins with a visit to the Jagannath Temple on the KISS campus and the outskirts of Bhubaneswar.

Samanta pays his obeisance to each deity at the temple, a replica of the Puri temple but on a smaller scale as you deeply religious?" I ask. "Deeply spiritual," he corrects. So does the man who beat all odds to build one of the largest residential institutes for tribals in the world attribute his achievement to fate or divine power? "The entire thing has been destined by my blessings," Samanta stresses. "I've just been a medium. How else could something so large come up so nicely and quickly in a state like Odisha without any backing?"

Morning ritual over, we head to his office at the end and find ourselves sitting in a pretty garden under a kadamba tree. Behind him stand Mahatma Gandhi, Buddha, Ambedkar, Swami Vivekananda and other icons carved in stone. The garden is actually Samanta's office, with a glass-top table, a few plastic chairs and a wireless bell.

Although it's a working day with a packed schedule, Samanta looks relaxed and all ready for what turns out to be a long and unburied chat. We greet Samanta who turns 50 the day before but he shrugs it off. "It's just a day and a rashi, no nakshatra. I was born into such a poor family that birthdays were never important. No one remembers. Just like street children, if anyone wants to do something on my birthday, I give them gaati!"

An empty cup

From building KIIT and KISS to establishing hospitals, banks and infrastructure across Odisha, Samanta's cup is full and often overflowing. But it wasn't like this always. In fact, he did not have a cup to begin with.

We rewind to Samanta's past when he was four. He woke up one morning in 1969 to cries and walls and realised that his father had died in a train accident.

The shattered family — comprising seven siblings and their mother — moved from Jambhaga where the deceased father was a contract labourer to Kalarabanka, a small village in Cuttack district.

"My father had no savings. So we grew up in extreme poverty. Sometimes we wouldn't get two square meals a day and my mother didn't have a second pair of sari," says Samanta.

Going to school was, obviously out of question. A young Samanta would collect dry leaves and sell them, and at



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Achyuta Samanta at his open-air office under a kadamba tree at KISS

ACHYUTA SAMANTA

other times play with children who did not go to school either. "One day we were running around making noise near a primary school when the headmaster stepped out. He caught me by my ears while the others fled," recalls Samanta.

It turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Taken back by the boy's condition the teacher offered him a place in the school. "He even helped me out with chalk and slate," smiles Samanta. "I loved studying and I've always stood first right through matriculation."

But taking time out to study was a task. "Whatever I studied in class had to be enough for me. We lived in a thatched house. There was no electricity and no money either to buy kerosene to light a lamp. My greatest strength was my memory."

When he was not at school during the day Samanta would collect paddy from houses and return it in the evening after shelling and sifting. The family would later feed on the leftover. "To add to the family's income, we would grow vegetables in our backyard and I would cycle faraway to sell them. On my way back I'd shop grocery for villagers to earn some more."

All along Samanta carried on with his studies and went on to do a master's in chemistry. He got the job of a college lecturer but that wasn't what he wanted.

His battle with poverty continued to weigh down on him and goaded him on to get "the poorest of the poor out of their dark days." The drive

turned him into a social reformer, a move too bold for someone without a firm footing of his own. "It was a huge struggle — the humiliation and the frustration I had to overcome," recalls Samanta. "I was 24 or 25 dreaming these big dreams of setting up two institutions knowing nothing about the world. Neither did I have a background nor exposure nor people to advise me. It was a Herculean task," says Samanta, who started out with Rs 5,000 he had earned by giving lectures and private tuition.

He did not balk at borrowing money from anyone willing to help his cause. "Four years later, in 1985, my debt ran up to Rs 15 lakh and I saw no way to repay it. With my debtors getting impatient, I even contemplated suicide."

But as destiny would have it, "a bank came to our rescue with a term loan of Rs 25 lakh on our face value." And there's been no looking back since.

KISS of life

Samanta cleared his loans and pitched KIIT in 1992. Part of the institute's revenues goes towards funding KISS, whose genesis lay in a play school set up in 1983 for 125 children of contract labourers. The refuge has since grown into a haven for 20,000 children of 62 tribes, including 13 primitive ones, from 23 districts of the state.

KIIT sprawls across 22 campuses offering over a 100 graduate and postgraduate programmes to 22,000 odd students. If KIIT ranks among the top-30 universities in the coun-

try, KISS has found partners in various UN bodies and is frequently visited by Nobel laureates, opinion-makers and celebrities from sports and films.

The two-dream institutions of Samanta now spread over 400 acres on the outskirts of the Odisha capital. "We had never dreamt that what was born in a rented house on a seed money of Rs 5,000 would turn into a banyan tree in 45 years. My intention was to do something for poor people, honestly," says Samanta.

KISS girls tribal children from the interiors of Odisha a holistic life of shelter, food and education (from the kindergarten to the postgraduate level) free. Samanta has done what policy-makers could not. "The parents of quite a few children at KISS are Maoists... We've prevented at least 1,000 children from becoming Maoists and another thousand from dying of malnutrition. Adversity life in their own world in the dense forests. They don't understand the importance of education," he says.

Samanta's biggest challenge was to convince tribals to let their children out of their world and into the home he had created for them. "I would travel to interior villages and meet with families to let their children out of their world and into the home he had created for them. "I would travel to interior villages and meet with families to let their children out of their world and into the home he had created for them. "I would travel to interior villages and meet with families to let their children out of their world and into the home he had created for them."

Samanta, who grew up in conditions worse than what tribals suffer today, says: "I know how poverty kills. I was born poor but had I not been

A BEACON OF HOPE



A student hang-out on one of the 23 campuses of KIIT

Achyuta Samanta addresses children during the morning assembly at KISS

Samanta serves lunch to children at the prayer-cum-dining hall at KISS

Pictures by Sanjib Mukherjee

educated I wouldn't be sitting here before you. I had to do the same for them, to bring them to the mainstream."

Samanta started with himself and his team scouting and handpicking children from families living below the poverty line. Now the pioneer gets more than 50,000 applications each year.

"KISS is very popular among tribals now. They all want a decent life and when they see their children getting food and education and wearing uniform, the parents get motivated. Apart from NGOs, district collectors and philanthropists who send names, we have our own team travelling to interior villages to spot the most indigenous children. We bring poor non-meritorious students and make them meritorious," says Samanta. Around 60 per cent of the students at KISS are girls.

In order to create opportunities for the children, KISS groom them on a wide range of parameters. "From how to walk, play the toilet, eat to how to comb and tie your hair, we groom them on everything. To keep their roots alive, the children are also made to practise their traditional song, dance and art forms."

Handling children of extremists is no mean task. "All staff members have been groomed. We need to have a moral impact on these children and I address them or visit them during lunch or dinner. Every teacher is responsible for 30 students, taking care of every aspect of their life," says Samanta.

No wonder he's been on the radar of political parties. "A lot of people have been after me to join politics since the 2011 elections but I am not interested. I'm the blue-eyed boy of every party, why spoil that?" he laughs.

Role model
The interview has been carried on for a while and we see that almost 30 visitors have queued up to meet him. They're seated on one side of the garden but they don't seem to mind the wait in the open lawn.

A group of students from Hanseo University in South Korea has arrived on an exchange programme at KISS. "They will spend time with the children. They'll also cut their (children's) hair," smiles Samanta as he excuses himself to go greet the guests with roses. KISS has a tie-up with 120 foreign universities.

While Samanta likes to be accessible and finds it hard to say no to anyone — a habit that has earned him the nickname Nova (a soft drink brand with the catchline "Never say no to Nova") — there's a downside too. He is keen to fulfil every request but fears letting people down. "Previously there were no restrictions or need for appointment to meet me but now we've started screening. A lot of people come for jobs or some help. I try to do what can but how many can I help?"

Get curious about the financial model designed by Samanta on which the two institutions are built. "The

growth of KISS is based on the growth of KIIT," says Samanta. "It was in my mind that if KIIT grows, KISS will grow too and God has made it happen. Five per cent of KIIT's financial turnover comes to KISS as charitable work, which is legally allowed. It is also statutory rule that three per cent of every staff salary will be donated to KISS for welfare activities. We also accept donations from parents who admit their children to KIIT. That way 90 per cent of the recurring expenditure is covered. The rest comes from noble people and organisations."

One half of Samanta's campus — home to 57,500 students and teachers — seems with privileged students from across the country, and the other half with deprived children. "Since last year we have been asking each KIIT student to mentor a KISS student. It motivates the tribal kids and improves patience and tolerance in elite kids."

It's luncheon and Samanta heads to the prayer-cum-dining hall to meet the children. The little ones are delighted to see their head.

Samanta doesn't bend around the bush when asked about who he looks up to for inspiration. "I have set my own example. I can be a role model for anyone who wants to be a social entrepreneur, social activist, an honest worker or an educationist. What is honesty and transparency, one can learn from me."

Samanta is now a household name in Odisha, especially by the tribals. He has also

turned his village Kalarabanka into a model village, complete with a residential high school, hospital, post office, bank and a police outpost, as well as safe drinking water. He has arranged for employment of 300 youths from 600 families under the national insurance scheme.

A life less ordinary

The conversation now moves from his office to his modestly furnished house. Samanta may have built institutions whose net worth is close to Rs 10,000 crore today but his philosophy is not to own any personal belonging — be it car, cell phone or house.

"Everything is in the name of KISS. It's my way of remaining honest," he explains. Samanta has an honorarium of Rs 30,000 a month as a professor.

When asked about marriage, Samanta explains his choice of staying single. "Because of my struggles I have not found time to look for happiness in marriage. Also, I'm happy living in this two-room rented house with 10 plastic chairs, taking care of my mother and donating what I save to charities. What I control over myself but my wife or children might not agree to live in a wretched condition while others enjoy the luxury I've created for them."

He says he once liked watching movies but "have lost all interest" over the past 15 years. "I've become a workaholic. The few hours he gets to himself are usually during flights when he goes into books. His pick? "Usually biographies of leaders like Nelson Mandela and A.P.J. Abdul Kalam."

Then as a soliloquy on life and his learning from it he says: "Swallow your humiliation, resolve your ego and adjust with the sentiments of other people."

The once shy Samanta can now address a gathering of hundreds on foreign shore and motivate them. He cites an example. "I was invited to address a global meeting in New York two years ago. It was a two-hour session followed by a question-answer session on transformational leadership. The questions were from 100 New Yorkers. I was more afraid of was. So before leaving for America, I turned into YouTube to follow their accent."

The session went off well — people listened, clapped and came away inspired.

Today, Samanta is conversant in Hindi, Bengali and English, apart from Oriya. "I grasped it all while meeting and talking to people over the years."

Among the many awards Samanta has won in India and abroad is the Gusi Peace Prize International.

Asked about his dreams, he says: "My aim is to set up 30 branches of KISS in 30 districts of Odisha and 30 branches in 30 states by 2020."

With the hope of doing something for the tribal regions of Bengal, Samanta had met chief minister Mamata Banerjee in Kolkata in 2010.

What is his message for Achyuta Samanta? Tell metro@bpmall.com

Alumni response mixed

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Once the new campus is ready, the Ballygunge addresses will be used for higher education initiatives, Lodha added.

The MP Birla group is now launching a nursing school and college in Rajarhat.

The new building will have a classical look with modern interiors. "Our teachers do not want a glass-and-steel structure," the chairman smiled.

The building will have more than 250 classrooms (20 sections for each class), over 30 "sophisticated" labs and studios for fashion designing and commercial art.

There will be 25 students in each class at the nursery level and 46-50 in each section in the higher classes. The school, which figured up in Guinness Book of World Records between 1984 and 1992 for having the maximum of students in the world, has 12,500 students. The figure may go up to 15,000.

The news of the shift drew



The chief minister inaugurates the Mukundapur campus of South Point on Wednesday. Picture by Pradyip Sanyal

mixed responses from the former students who attended the programme. "School was a 15-minute walk from my Ballygunge home. No one can walk to the school once it moves to the new campus," said film editor Arghyakamal Mitra. "I will be relieved to see the crowd leave," chuckled economist and Mandeville Gardens

resident Abhirup Sarkar, possibly voicing the sentiments of his neighbours too.

The chief minister lauded the school for maintaining a high standard and reiterated a suggestion to build a university. She also handed over scholarships on behalf of the school to 25 needy and meritorious students.

Gas leak whiff in Presi girl death

STAFF REPORTER

Sanantika Banerjee, the Presidency University student who was found dead in her paying guest accommodation off College Street, might have died after inhaling cooking gas, a report from the state forensic sciences laboratory has said.

The report says the forensic experts found "high concentration" of an "irritating and suffocating" gas, which was identified as carbon monoxide.

Banerjee, 22, from Jalpaiguri, was doing her master's in physics at Presidency. She was found unconscious in her Arupali Lane room on January 4. When her landlady broke open

the door in the presence of police, she was frothing at her mouth. She was declared dead in hospital.

Her roommate Subarna Lakshmi, from Rangung, recovered after treatment.

"The human nasal organ loses sensitivity on being exposed to prolonged inhalation of a gas," a police officer quoting from the forensic report that reached the police on Wednesday.

He said both women had been exposed to the gas for a prolonged period but couldn't relate to the pungent smell of their room.

Car theft racket busted

STAFF REPORTER

A man boarded a Swift Dzire taxi in the city, offered the driver a soft drink laced with sedatives, damped him near Eco Park in New Town and fled with the car.

The car stolen in May was recently traced to Kankana in Burdwan.

Police claimed to have busted an inter-state vehicle theft racket and seized three cars, including the stolen taxi.

"One of the racketeers boarded the taxi on BK Pal Avenue in north Calcutta, went to several places and stole the vehicle after giving the driver a soft drink laced with sedatives," joint commissioner (crime) Pallab Kanti Ghosh said.

"The unconscious driver was found in Rajarhat."

The police seized the car from Kankana and arrested Javed Khan who had bought the car from the racketeers.

Car theft racket busted

STAFF REPORTER

The car changed hands at least twice before reaching Kankana, the police said.

Four others — Vishal Tiwari, Prem Kumar, Vikram Chandra and Aji Kumar Das — were arrested recently in connection with the theft.

While Vishal and Aji are from the Phoolbagan area, Vikram is from Baranagar and Prem is from Bihar's Siwan district. The police said they would steal and smuggle cars from across Bengal, Bihar and Gujarat.

"We have seized two more Swift Dzires from two places in Howrah," said an officer of the detective department's motor theft section.

One of the two cars was stolen from Gujarat, a day after it was bought. It was still to get a registration certificate. When it was seized from Howrah it had a fake number plate, the police said.

Police made the arrests based on a complaint lodged by the owner of the Swift Dzire taxi with Jarabagan police station. The police are thinking of starting separate cases in Mauritania and Aji Kumar Das — were arrested recently in connection with the theft of the two other vehicles.

All the arrested are in police custody.

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Officers of Garden Reach police station arrested Muquaddar Khan, 31, and Mohammed Afsar, 40, and Mohammed Raju 52, on Tuesday night and seized 74 grams of heroin from them.

The policemen also seized Rs 5,000 from them.

Body found
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