

*The*  
**Smart Manager**

**EXCLUSIVE**

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*navigating india  
through a choppy world*

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**a fine balance**  
**india comes to IIM**

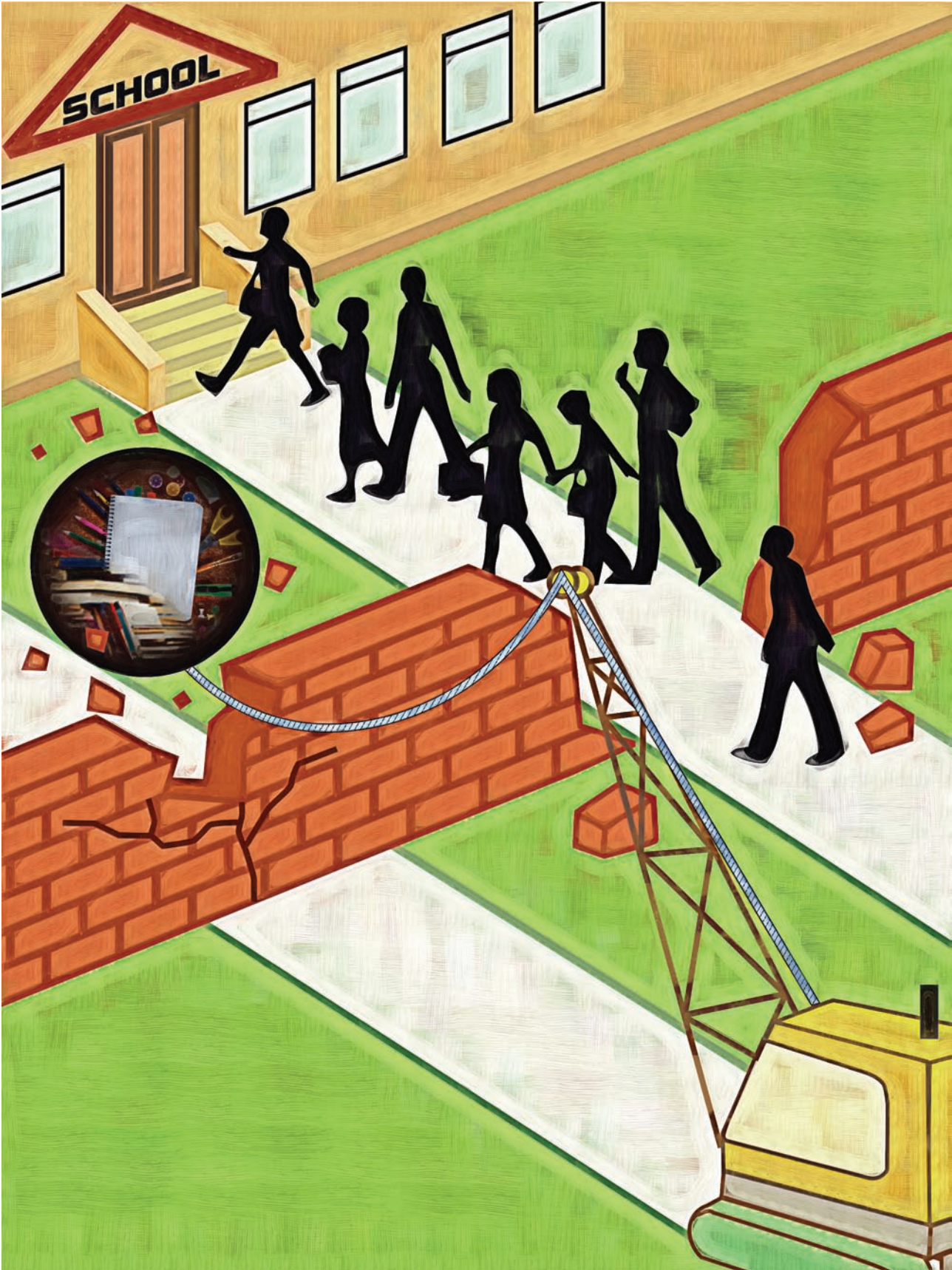


Illustration by: nilesh jvalekar



Banerjee is founder of The Levelfield School, an organization that aims to democratize high-quality, English-medium school education. The Levelfield school won the 2011 Sankalp Award in the education segment. The Sankalp Awards are given to innovative social enterprises with business excellence and strong social impact.

# leveling the field

□ arghya banerjee

**SMART SUMMARY** The much-advertized hunger for success among the denizens of India's tier II and tier III cities has been the big story of the past decade. This hunger has rewritten hierarchies, given us new idols, and, most significantly, created new markets and models for the knowledge business that not so long ago was focused almost exclusively on urban centers. How relevant is it to memorize Ampere's Law, Charles's Law and the dates of the battles of Panipat in this brave new world?



It was almost a crazy thing to do.

In 2008, I was running the Indian operations of Irevna, a large equity research outsourcing firm, part of the CRISIL/Standard & Poor's group. I would consider myself fortunate to have got such a huge responsibility within just seven years of leaving bschool. But then I decided to leave it all to start my own venture, in the seemingly unrelated area of K12 education, and relocate to a small town.

Several people asked me why.

There were, in fact, quite a few drivers behind my decision. Irevna was a large recruiter of knowledge talent. We used to recruit around 200 CA/MBAs in a year. With our tough client deadlines, it was important for our new recruits to hit the ground running. But many of the new recruits were not fully workplace-ready in several dimensions. They were not taught how to express themselves clearly and logically—in spoken as well as in written English. They found it difficult to apply what they had learnt at college to solve real-life problems.

We designed a month-long, intensive training program to address those issues. However, I always felt that when we try to teach such basic things to postgraduates, it is quite a late intervention. Why are these skills not blended into school education? Right from the early days of childhood, we should learn to express ourselves well, apply our knowledge to solve new problems and question established answers.

Around the same time, my daughter was ready to start school, and I started looking for a school for her. After looking at several brand-name schools, I did not feel quite encouraged. The USP for most schools seemed to be their large, lush green campuses, airconditioned classrooms, and audio-visual equipment. Not many schools seemed to be thinking deeply about what to teach, and how to teach that well.

This is not surprising, because (with all due respect) K12 schools are run by people who are not really

connected to the demands of the modern world. How many principals of K12 schools have themselves come from the best educational institutes of India and have a stellar academic record? How many of them worked in places other than a school to know the demands of the real world?

So I decided to set up my own K12 school—The Levelfield School. I set it up in a tier III town in West Bengal, 200km from Kolkata. Being from such a town myself, I always felt that students from such areas have as much potential as city kids, but they fall behind in their life and career due to lack of good quality school education. Other than being a highest quality K-12 school, like an IIT of school education, the vision of The Levelfield School is also to address that gap.



### out of memory

When we look back at our own school days, sometimes we feel we wasted a lot of time memorizing useless facts. Did we really need to memorize in which year the third battle of Panipat happened? Did we need to memorize Charles Law, Ampere's Law and the likes? History for us was a blur of dates and names. Chemistry and physics were a concoction of symbols. We studied without understanding why we are studying, and how it can be useful.

Rote learning is a widely condemned evil. Everybody now agrees that memorizing without understanding



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does not achieve much purpose. But rote learning goes deeper than what most people understand. Right at the kindergarten level, when you are teaching your child to spell the numbers, or copy them neatly in good handwriting—it is rote learning. We see a lot of children of age 4-5 can spell ‘fifty nine’, but they cannot tell if 71 is bigger than 59. In most schools, numbers are not taught as quantity—but as pictures or words.

At the primary level, the same problem continues. Multiplication tables are memorized as rhymes. Memorizing three fours are twelve is same as memorizing *Ba Ba Black Sheep*. Older kids can even do long multiplication (for example, a sum like  $5724 \times 43$ ), but will not be able to tell you (without working it out) if the answer to the sum will be more than 10,000 or less.

Rote learning comes in all shapes and forms. When your 5-year-old kid can spell ‘alligator’ because it comes in the word-list under ‘A’, but cannot read a simpler, but unfamiliar phonetic word like ‘help’—you know rote learning has reared its ugly head. When your kid can read his textbook, but cannot comprehend unseen passages of similar difficulty—you know that no real learning has taken place. When they say ‘Egypt is the



gift of Nile’, but cannot answer how a river is useful to people, you know that their ability to think is getting rusted by constant reliance on memory-driven learning.

### application-friendly learning

At Levelfield, we designed our teaching methodologies to ensure learning with understanding. We would not like our children to say “This was not taught at school (or at home), so I can’t do it.” We spent the last three years to create a huge library of problems that test application orientation and higher-order thinking.

Thinking orientation is a constant theme in our school. Beyond thinking-oriented problems in mathematics and science, we also get children to solve a lot of analytical puzzles like Nonogram, Shikaku, Sudoku and Tangram. There is also an emphasis on strategy games; in addition to chess, our favorites are the Japanese strategy games Go and Gomoku. The idea is to get children to think every day, so that exercising the mind becomes a habit for them.

In English too, our approach is similar. We do not believe that children can truly learn to read by reading a 50-page textbook many times during the year. She will possibly memorize the textbook but will not develop the ability to read anything else. Rather, children should be exposed to a large amount of reading material so that they can read something new every day.

However, the challenge is to create so much of reading material that is appropriate for a primary level child, who has just begun reading. The vocabulary has to be simple, the sentence construction uncomplicated. Most storybooks available in the market do not fit the bill—they seem to think that just by employing large font and nice pictures they can make the book appealing for kids.

At Levelfield, we have created a huge amount of reading material appropriate for children. Some of the stories are conceptualized and written by us, some of them are rewritten version of folktales and fables from the world, and some others rewritten versions of out-of-copyright children's classics like *The Prince and the Pauper* or *Gulliver's Travels*. You will not find a version of *Prince and the Pauper* in the market which is appropriate for an 8-year-old. Our 'independent reading' module is finely graded, starting from simple material which uses only the top-200 most frequently occurring English words, and goes on to become more difficult step by step.

The module has been so effective that children from vernacular-medium backgrounds, who just a year back could not read a sentence in English, can now read 50-100 page books independently.

In our opinion, the ability to read and the ability to think and solve problems are the two most important ingredients of learning. In addition, kids also need to learn about the world around them. Most schools tackle this by a subject like General Knowledge, where they teach a lot of trivia, which in our belief is again a useless, rote-learning approach.

### the power of moving images

To teach about the world, we need to simulate the world within the four walls of the classroom and have discussions/debates on it. And nothing does it better than stories and cinemas. At Levelfield, storytelling and

movie screenings are done not just for entertainment but to expose children to new concepts. For example, when we show them a reputed children's movie like *A Little Princess*, in which the little girl's father goes away to battle, we talk about why battles happen between countries. When we tell them the story of *Around the World in Eighty Days*, we expose them to the concept of the International Date Line and time differences between countries.

Stories and cinemas continue to be an important tool for teaching in higher classes as well. In 9th standard History, a key topic is World War II and the rise of Nazi Germany. Why not show them Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* to get them interested in that period? While teaching different systems of governance (which is part of the secondary syllabus), how about using George Orwell's *Animal Farm* to illustrate communism?



### winning trust

For small-town parents, our methods mark a radical departure from what they are used to seeing in schools. We expected some initial skepticism in the initial few months. Some parents asked why we do not have many books like other schools have—textbooks on General knowledge, Moral Science, History, Geography, etc. Some others were concerned about how their children will learn without any private tuition. Several others did not understand our continuous evaluation system and



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were concerned about our lack of exam and marks system.

We had to hold numerous meetings with the parents to address these. We needed to explain our methodology to them in detail. We showed them video recordings of our classes and allowed some of them to sit during classes as observers. But in the end, the transformation of the students spoke for itself. Now, when they come to the school to pick up their kids, they see them speaking in English fluently with their friends. They see their kids pick up new English storybooks and independently read them at home. In rare occasions, when we give homework, the parents see their children solving problems which sometimes they have difficulty grasping themselves! The visible improvement in their children has converted the initial skeptics into strong proponents of the school.

### creating new benchmarks and a new approach to competition

At Levelfield, we challenged the established mindset. Not just in the way we teach, but also in the overall way we operate.

While hiring teachers, we do not look for experience but for ability. We look at intrinsic capabilities like intelligence, creativity and application-orientation. After hiring, they undergo a rigorous training into our methodology.

We use a case-study method of interview to select our teachers which tests their ability to explain the world around. They could be asked to explain anything that we see around us. A typical question could be—let's say we buy a car and a house [at the same time], why do we see the car price moving down the following year and the house price going up?

For students, the assessment system we employ is quite different as well. With our small classes, the teachers know the capabilities of each child very well. In our assessment reports, we do not give marks or grades, rather judge them on whether they have reached the desired milestones for the class. We do not encourage competition within the class, though from grade III onwards, we get our students to sit for national-level diagnostic tests like the ASSET or the Macmillan IAIS so that we can benchmark them with students across India.

We believe that till a certain point, students should learn at their own pace. But after the foundations are covered, 'learning to compete' is also a useful skill in the real world. Such competitions must be in a bigger arena, not within the small confines of the school. That explains our reasons for not giving ranks or marks in our internal evaluation, but encourage the students to sit for a national-level benchmarking test.

We also firmly believe that the learning experience in the classroom is what matters, so our infrastructure is quite spartan. We chose not to have swimming pools, air-conditioned classrooms and a large office for the principal. This keeps our cost structure reasonable. Affordability is also enhanced by comprehensive education at school and lack of need for any private tuition.

After just a year of running the school, the results have been astounding. At a recent nationwide ASSET test (conducted by the reputed assessment agency Educational Initiatives), Levelfield came among the top 10 schools in India in several subject-class combinations. More than half of our students were in the top 15%, with one being a top-ten ranker among students from all over India. This speaks of a magical transformation,

given that just a year back most of these students could not speak or read English and were steeped into rote learning.

More importantly, through this transformation of students, Levelfield has given hope to the local community that their children can transcend the limitations of the small town, and dream of making a place for themselves in the outside world.

### sustaining through iconic quality

When one talks about ‘affordable schools’ focused on tier III towns, most players talk about a bare-bones, moderate-quality setup. I don’t believe such a model would succeed. Small-town children have a lot of initial disadvantages. To make a real impact, the school has to be better than the best metro-city schools—a school of ‘iconic’ quality. And unless the school can show real improvement in students, it will not succeed. Which is why we believe that the correct operating model is one that pursues high quality.

A high-quality model is more financially sustainable too, as such a proposition opens up many more avenues to monetize. For a high-quality school like Levelfield, it is possible to add on a residential infrastructure which can charge much higher fees from outstation students, enhancing affordability further for local students. It can monetize its huge intellectual property base through publishing books or magazines. It can run specialized modules on reading skills or mental arithmetic, further

leveraging its intellectual property. It can move into a much more capital-light school management business model—where other entities (real-estate developers, corporate houses) build the infrastructure, and Levelfield runs the schools for them. We can partner with government and build model schools for them. All these and more are part of the future vision of Levelfield.

In the future, we would like to move away from the infrastructure component of the school ventures. We believe our core competence lies in giving the children a great classroom experience, not really in acquiring land and constructing school buildings. After the first couple of schools, we would seek partners who would be interested in building the infrastructure for future Levelfield Schools, on a revenue-sharing basis. By focusing on what we do best, we believe we will be able to spread our methodologies far and wide, and achieve greater impact.

But right now, we are quite happy doing what we are doing. For an enterprise, the most exciting days are the initial days. As somebody said, ‘An entrepreneur is the artist of the business world’, and for such an artist the joy of creation, the joy of initial impact, and the joy of surpassing challenges is what makes the whole journey worthwhile. The journey is really the destination. □



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