



Parikrma Champions League: Sports for Equality

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There was pin-drop silence in the stadium as the striker from The Ryan International School proceeded to take the spot kick. The small frame of the goalkeeper from Parikrma Centre for Learning looked even slighter defending the 24-foot width between the goalposts. The vociferous supporters of the Parikrma School, including students, teachers and senior management from Menzies Aviation (one of whom was the commentator) had gone silent in nervousness – if the striker converted the spot kick, Ryan International School would move onto the final at Parikrma’s expense. A few steady steps, a confident kick and despite a valiant effort from the goalkeeper, the ball found the back of the net. As the electronic score board at the Bangalore Football Stadium flashed the words GOAL, the commentator put on a brave face to declare the end of the tie-breaker, resulting in Ryan International School moving onto the final round of the *Equality Cup*. The players jumped on one another in joy, while Shukla Bose, the founder of Parikrma, had disappointment writ large on her face. She braced herself for the final day of the third edition of Parikrma Champions League (PCL), a unique inter-school football tournament that she had organized along with Menzies Aviation, which intended to bring together school children from various economic backgrounds to compete on equal footing. She commented:

It would have been hugely encouraging for the children if we had made it to the finals. But given that our team does not even have a playground to practice², this by itself is a huge achievement. Moreover, it is about participating, playing and competing to the best of their abilities. The high that the children get, playing or watching sports goes a long way in making them better students and better individuals. It is not about any one game. It’s about the bigger picture of development through sports.

The inspiration for PCL came from the desire to overturn a fundamental inequality. When Parikrma – a free school for underprivileged children- wanted to take part in an inter-school football league, they were denied invitation by the elite schools of Bangalore. Therefore, Shukla decided to start a football league of her own. Her dream was to make it inclusive and to organize it in such a manner that even the so-called elite schools from the city and beyond would want to be a part of it. In Menzies Aviation, she found a perfect corporate partner who not only funded the initiative, but also sent some of their top managers to organize the event so that PCL became nothing short of world-class. During the past three editions, PCL has evolved strength to strength, becoming one of the most coveted inter-school football tournaments in Bangalore, and has benefitted Parikrma and Menzies in developing their

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² The Parikrma team travelled 15kms every morning at 4 am to the campus of Indian Institute of Science to practice for a couple of hours before school started.

management talent and exposing them to working in teams that cut across geographic, cultural and language barriers.

Parikrma – The Evolution

Shukla started the Parikrma³ Humanity Foundation in 2003 with the intention of transforming the lives of children who lived in slums, and would otherwise not have the opportunity to attend school. As a member of the government’s “Commission on Slum Clearance Board”, she realized that it took the government machinery an enormous amount of time to get things done, and given the alarming number of children who were out of school in India⁴, there was hardly any time to lose. She therefore decided to start a school on her own, renting a rooftop for INR 2700 in a slum in Bangalore, starting with a team of 11 teachers instructing 165 children⁵. Since the roof of the building was only partially covered by a tin shade, the teachers and students had to huddle in a corner during the rainy season, which turned out to be a unique bonding experience and was symbolic of Parikrma’s journey where adversities were often transformed into opportunities. During the next ten years, Parikrma grew to four schools and a junior college, which together provided education to more than 1500 children coming from 69 slums and four orphanages in Bangalore.

Since its inception, Shukla was determined that Parikrma would not get caught up in the numbers game. Rather than focusing on the *number* of children who were getting educated, they would focus on the *quality* of education such that every child was adequately prepared to face the world on equal footing compared to their more fortunate peers from privileged backgrounds. As a result, Parikrma schools adopted the ICSE⁶ curriculum that was deemed to be best-in-class, and use English as the medium of instruction so that the children could develop into global citizens and be able to communicate anywhere in the world. Despite initial apprehensions, the children coped well with the rigours of the curriculum and all of them developed fluency in English such that they were as much comfortable in talking to senior leaders of corporate India as they were in interacting with scientists from NASA during their tours for international exposure.

Parikrma schools intended to create a classroom environment that got the children interested, engaged and encouraged them to be critical thinkers. The teachers were trained to ask open-ended questions rather than deliver lectures. They were also encouraged to experiment with pedagogical methods such that the focus of the class was on learning instead of competing against one another. Despite its humble beginnings, Parikrma schools invested substantially in modern technology such as Smart Boards so that the classroom infrastructure was comparable to any modern school. Classroom teaching was complemented with guest lectures from professors and scientists from reputed institutions, open forums for debate and dynamic discussions. For example, as part of their CSR initiative, Adobe Technologies launched “Adobe Youth Voice Programme” where children were encouraged to produce

³ The word “Parikrma” means rotation or circumambulation that represents the 360-degree approach to change that Parikrma schools intended to introduce in the lives of the children.

⁴ India has about 440 million children. Though a majority of them are enrolled in schools, 50% of them do not attend schools regularly. Even among those who attend, fewer than half can do basic mathematics or reading after five years of schooling.

⁵ According to a 2007 report titled “Slums and Urban Welfare in Karnataka’s Development” by Supriya Roy Chowdhury, about 20% of Bangalore’s population or 2.2 million people live in slums.

⁶ Indian Council of Secondary Education

films on their own. Adobe also held one of their board meetings in Parikrma, which was followed by a question and answer session (a mock AGM!) with the children.

Since almost all the children in Parikrma schools were first-generation learners, they often did not have an environment conducive to learning in their homes. With an average income of INR 2500-4500 per month, most of their families struggled to make ends meet, thereby falling short in providing adequate nutrition or healthcare for their children. Therefore, Parikrma schools made arrangements to feed the children as well as provide them with basic healthcare. Close to 90% of the calorific needs of the children were met through nutrition meals provided in the schools. Children were also provided with immunization and vitamins, and taken for health checkups twice a year. Parikrma also bore all hospitalization and surgery charges when necessary. For example, many of the children needed braces for their teeth or a cleft lip / palate surgery that their parents could not afford. Parikrma provided them with the necessary treatment because it was felt that it would boost the confidence level of the children. Such healthcare initiatives at Parikrma were supported by local hospitals such as NIMHANS and Manipal Hospital as part of their CSR initiatives.

It was not long before Shukla and her team realized that to keep the children in school they needed to make interventions even at home. The fathers of most of the children were alcoholics and their mothers were often struggling to earn a proper livelihood. Many of them were at the receiving end of various kinds of exploitation. It was difficult for the children to sustain what they learned at school when they went back to their homes characterized by extreme poverty and violence, often exposing the children to events that left a lasting negative impression on their impressionable minds. Many of the children were forced to discontinue studies so that they could supplement their meagre family incomes. Moreover, not all the parents believed that educating their children would make much difference to their lives. Parikrma therefore started to run programmes that not only counselled parents, but also enabled them to earn more income. The mothers were imparted with skills-training such as tailoring and embroidery, and were connected to boutiques that could employ them. Many of the fathers were sent to de-addiction programmes, and Shukla used her corporate connections to get some of them employed in small manufacturing units once they completed the programme. Some of the others were provided with soft loans so that they could start their own businesses. For example, three of the fathers were taught to cook and eventually started a catering service that supplied food to Parikrma schools.

Soon, the impact that these interventions had on the families became evident. Parent-teacher meeting attendance shot up to 80%. Most of the children taught their parents how to sign their names so that the parents no longer needed to give thumb impressions. Seeing the effect that education was having on their children, the mothers of some of the children approached Parikrma with the hope of getting educated themselves. Parikrma thus started an after-school programme for the parents that would teach them basic English and mathematics. They were exposed to science and thereby encouraged to think rationally, instead of depending on blind faith and superstition. With the help of social workers who worked in the slums, Parikrma organized informal self-help groups and trained them in saving habits. Parikrma also helped them to open bank accounts where Shukla acted as a guarantor. To a limited extent, Parikrma also provided the parents assistance in healthcare. For example, the Rotary Club conducted an eye-clinic and Kidwai Hospitals organized a cancer-detection camp and provided chemotherapy to patients free of cost. Shukla commented:

Our intention is to bring about a 360-degree transformation in the lives of the children so that they have the right values and develop into confident citizens with a deep sense of responsibility. We keep the final product in mind and work towards it, rather than worrying about sustainability or scalability. We do not want to have many Parikrma schools – we would rather like other schools to embrace the “Parikrma way” of education. We would like to train and mentor teachers in government schools, who should move away from the traditional chalk and board teaching method. The teaching community has lost its pride in the profession and we need to restore that.

Thus, the group of teachers at Parikrma was critical for achieving the vision that Shukla set out for the organization. The teachers were a highly motivated lot, averaging about 30 years of age, who bonded closely with the children and shared responsibilities of the 360-degree transformation that Shukla talked about so often. Parikrma also worked with several social workers who facilitated their connection with the local communities.

Since Parikrma never believed that classroom-based teaching was the only way of educating children, it laid a strong emphasis on sports. Shukla realized that sports enabled Parikrma to reach out to some children who were otherwise difficult to be influenced by other means of education and decided to introduce three disciplines – athletics, taekwondo and football. It was not long before Parikrma students started to win medals in sporting events as well as make their way into state junior teams. However, the benefits of sports for these children went beyond winning. While sports was an effective means of imparting values such as responsibility, collaboration, team-spirit and fairness in competition, it also enabled the children to channel their energy meaningfully, develop pride in their achievements and make them confident to face the world.

For its financial sustainability, Parikrma was primarily dependent on grants and the philanthropic efforts of corporations. It maintained a wide network of corporate connections that included Yahoo!, Tech-Mahindra, St. Gobain and Tesco, who as part of their CSR programmes got engaged with different initiatives at Parikrma. For example, Synopsis donated US\$ 25K for a programme titled the *Joy of Learning Science*, while Cognizant and Rabobank were involved in developing a *Circle of Life* software programme that would enable Parikrma to track the evolution of a child. Menzies Aviation, part of the US\$ 2.5 billion John Menzies Plc, was one such well-wisher of Parikrma, providing financial support⁷. However, the nature of their engagement changed dramatically from 2011, when Parikrma and Menzies decided to organize PCL.

PCL: Stepping up Menzies’ CSR Initiative

Richard Knight, a consultant from Masaai Camel Limited, who worked closely with Menzies Aviation, had been talking to Mr. Craig Smyth, President and Managing Director of Menzies Aviation about *community challenges* – where organizations sent their managers to work with communities to solve some specific problem or to address some need of the community. It provided managers with experiential learning in a context that was far removed from what they were familiar with. Such experiences also created deep emotional connections because it not only made the managers intimately aware of the challenges the community faced, but also created a kind of satisfaction in addressing the

needs of such typically underprivileged communities. Craig mulled over the idea for a couple of years before he invited Richard to talk to the Menzies Board about it. It was a year when Menzies had performed particularly well in business and wanted to reward its top performers with something exciting such as sending them for a mountaineering trip to Kilimanjaro. However, Richard told them that they should consider community challenges instead, and the board seemed interested. They asked him to get back to them with several possible locations from around the world from which the board would make a final selection. As part of his desk research, Richard looked at organizations and communities with whom Menzies already had some connection and located Parikrma in Bangalore, India to whom Menzies were donating GBP 5000 every year as part of their CSR initiative. He rang up Shukla Bose and inquired how Menzies' community challenge could address any need that she had. On hearing about her desire to start a football tournament and her larger dream of developing underprivileged children through sports, he realized that it could turn out to be the opportunity that he was looking for. When he presented the idea to the Menzies board, they liked it⁸ and thus, Parikrma found its corporate supporter to start Parikrma Champions League, an under-16 football tournament for schools.

It was decided that the organizing team of PCL would comprise an equal number of members from Parikrma and Menzies. While the team members from Parikrma would do the groundwork in Bangalore, those from Menzies would work remotely until they arrived in Bangalore a few days before the tournament. In India, inter-school football did not evoke a favourable perception – they were often mismanaged, conducted in stadiums that had poor field conditions where neither the officials nor the organizers arrived on time. Naturally, it was difficult to attract spectators to such events or to generate any kind of excitement around them. The PCL organizing team decided to change all that. They visualized PCL to be a high profile entertaining event that would be conducted in a stadium that had the best facilities such as artificial turf, a players' tunnel and an electronic scoreboard. The tournament would have colourful opening and closing ceremonies that would attract star players and corporate leaders as guests. The players would be provided with proper nutrition and healthcare facilities, and state-of-the-art technology would be used to determine their ages correctly⁹. In order to raise its profile, a promotional video was shot with the Celtics¹⁰ football team. Arson Wenger, the manager of Arsenal¹¹ football club sent a congratulatory message and Alan Shearer¹² did a *Talking Heads* video to convey their best wishes.

PCL 2011 turned out to be a grand success, realizing Shukla's dream of a Parikrma school team competing with the best schools in Bangalore on equal footing. The participating teams and the media were impressed with the professionalism with which the tournament was conducted and the quality of infrastructure that was provided to the players. In terms of organizing an inter-school football tournament, PCL set the standards high and it was not long before it became an aspirational tournament for other schools to take part. However, for Parikrma and Menzies, the impact of PCL went far beyond the tournament.

⁸ Menzies also chose other community challenges such as working with the Zulu Community in South Africa to develop a pre-school facility and to build an outdoor social area for an orphanage in Romania.

⁹ In the absence of technology that determined age of participants, fielding of over-age players was endemic in these levels of tournaments in India.

¹⁰ The Celtic Football Club is a leading Scottish football club based in Glasgow, which plays in the Scottish Premiership.

¹¹ Arsenal is a leading football club playing in the English Premier League.

¹² Alan Shearer is a former England international who played for many leading clubs in the English Premier League. He is widely regarded as one of England's best strikers. He worked for the BBC as an expert commentator after retiring from playing football in 2006.

For the ten members of the organizing committee who were chosen from Parikrma, it was their first experience working with an international team. Many of them had not even stepped out of Bangalore during their lifetime. Organizing PCL with the Menzies team provided them an opportunity not only to interact with people from different cultures, but to also learn about managing a project that was very different from the kind of activities that they were used to doing as part of their work in the schools. The Menzies team arrived in Bangalore a week before the tournament, and started to familiarize themselves with the country and its context. For many of them, it was their first visit to India. Apart from getting to know their team members from Parikrma, they were taken to visit the Parikrma schools. Sarah Williams, Senior VP of Human Resources who had accompanied the Menzies team recollected:

Visiting the schools was a very humbling experience. Even if I knew what to expect, one is never prepared for what you actually see. To visit the communities and to understand where the children came from ...sometimes that can be heartbreaking. The idea was to put this all into a context for our managers, to expose them to something that they have never experienced before. The visits and the tournament make them well prepared for the unexpected.

The Menzies team faced plenty of the unexpected when they got down to organizing the tournament. For example, PCL 2012 could not start on the planned date because there was a *bandh*¹³ in Bangalore. And a few weeks before PCL 2013, the organizing team learned that the designated football stadium would not be available because Bangalore's football team that was participating in the national league needed the stadium for their practice. Therefore, the dates for the tournament had to be changed at short notice. Richard Knight noted:

This tests our flexibility, whether we can adapt to change. This is also about learning to work under pressure. It is a real event and the team needs to deliver. How does one put together a tournament within a few days when things can go wrong along any dimensions? Part of it is about evaluating risks and anticipating. One day the KSFA¹⁴ told us "we got a meeting tomorrow; you got to keep the noise down"! How do you deal with that during the middle of a tournament? When we strictly enforced the age-limit for the participating teams and disqualified a few of their players, the team managers became upset. But we needed to be firm and stick to our stand.

Peter Harraway, VP Finance of Menzies UK and Ireland narrated his experience of being part of the 2012 PCL:

I found it be an excellent arena in which to develop leadership and management skills. As a group we were working under pressure to deliver a real project where there were tangible consequences for failure. That, combined with being immersed into a foreign environment with a diverse group of people from all over the globe, not to mention a few hundred hyper-active school children thrown into the mix, made for a real challenge. The course enabled participants to put the theory into practice and develop

¹³ A Hindi word that literally implies "closed", it denotes a general strike, usually called by a political party as a mark of protest. It is a means of civil disobedience where the public is expected to stay at home and all services are either disrupted or stopped. The Supreme Court of India banned them in 1998, but all political parties continue to organize them.

¹⁴ Karnataka State Football Association

themselves through surprisingly open group feedback sessions and one-to-one appraisals. I certainly found this to be very innovative and a great benefit to all involved¹⁵.

Over the last couple of years, the human resource development team at Menzies worked closely with Richard to bring greater structure to the leadership development programme that took place in the backdrop of PCL. Before they came to India, the Menzies' participants filled a competency profile. After a year, they once again filled the profile, having gone through and reflected on their PCL experience. Any improvement in the profile that could be traced back to the PCL experience was considered a measure of success. During the tournament, the team had regular debriefing sessions analyzing what went right and what could have been done better. These sessions were attended by Shukla and the team members of Parikrma, who often explained the contextual nuances that were necessary to comprehend what happened or what did not go as planned. Richard and Sarah also spent time with the participants, individually and collectively, providing them feedback on cross-cultural communication, team dynamics, decision-making and connected those learning to the participants' individual development plan and to the challenges they faced in their business. Sarah commented:

We operate close to 150 stations in 30 countries worldwide that are culturally diverse. Often, our managers are asked to go and work in completely unfamiliar stations, beginning from the scratch. That would involve project planning, delivering under pressure, communicating across cultural barriers. Thus, the skills that they learn here are very relevant and readily transferrable. When they are here, we facilitate their learning process. The remote working that we planned before the start of the tournament did not work well. Thus, the team realized the importance of face-to-face communication, especially when it is cross-cultural. They learn how to ask the right questions, and the fact that what is taken for granted in one context is considered unacceptable in another.

Mervyn Walker, EVP Operations of Menzies, who had visited India during all three tournaments, pointed out some of the other benefits of this experience:

The 12 senior managers from different parts of the world come together to work for 5-6 weeks, in an intense atmosphere, which takes them away from their comfort zone. This is a unique bonding experience, a professional tie that often becomes a lifelong personal connection. It increases cohesiveness and their personal involvement with the organization. We see most of them making faster career progression in Menzies and very few of them leaving the organization. This is not about giving and forgetting – Menzies is getting back from what they have been giving, the children are having a fine tournament and I am sure that there is benefit for the teachers from Parikrma.

Shukla could definitely feel the positive impact that PCL was having on the teachers at Parikrma. While in its first year, she picked up the best of teachers to be part of the organizing committee to ensure that the tournament was a success, she subsequently started to look at it as a learning and development opportunity for her teachers. Therefore, she selected people who had the most potential but did not have

¹⁵ Adopted from <http://www.menziesaviation.com/item/detail/p/4/id/551/ref/CCTC---Cross-Cultural-Team-Challenge> accessed on 10th February, 2014

the exposure and were yet to prove themselves. Knowing how many in India got intimidated by foreigners and suffered from some kind of inferiority complex, she insisted that they worked as equals with their counterparts from Menzies:

I tell them that since you are in home territory, you are in far better position to deal with the challenges than your team members from Menzies. And I see remarkable changes in their behaviour and attitude. Having worked shoulder to shoulder with Menzies, they gain in confidence, learn how to setup and follow processes and what it takes to deliver a project and a programme.

PCL rapidly grew in its scope and status over the past three editions. The 2013 tournament was preceded by a sports workshop conducted by Charu Shirma¹⁶ and Nandan Kamath that was attended by children from different schools. On its final day, there was a football match held between CEOs that saw enthusiastic participation from corporations. Reflecting about the future of PCL, Mervyn commented:

We are happy to be associated with PCL. We want the tournament to grow each year. We want more schools to participate in PCL, even from outside of India, we want greater coverage and we will send more managers to organize the event. But finally, I feel that what we want is secondary. It is important to understand where Parikrma wants PCL to go.

Table 1: Evolution of Parikrma Champions League (parameters are illustrative only)

Year	Number of Participating Teams from Bangalore	Number of Participating Teams From Outside of Bangalore	Special Events Held
2011	14	2	
2012	13	2	
2013	13	3	Sports workshop for children, CEOs football match

¹⁶ Charu Sharma is a famous Indian commentator, compere and quiz master and Nandan Kamath is the managing trustee of GoSports Foundation that works to develop sports talent in India.