

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

## TO LEARN WITH DIGNITY

*Caned at nine for touching an upper-caste teacher, Kaila has vowed to educate the oppressed*

by Shivam Vij

IN FAR AWAY LOS ANGELES, BENJAMIN PAUL KAILA IS A SUCCESSFUL IT professional. But he has not quite forgotten his Dalit roots in Andhra Pradesh. Kaila, 45, co-ordinates an annual scholarship scheme for deserving Dalit students in his home state. It's a gesture that comes minus any media glare and this is the third year of his scholarship scheme.

As a child in a Dalit settlement in a village in Guntur district, Kaila would walk four miles to attend classes in a Telugu-medium school. Living without electricity, water or sanitation, he eventually obtained a postgraduate diploma in computer science and worked in the IT industry in Hyderabad and Mumbai for a few years. His earliest memory of caste discrimination is when he was nine years old: a teacher caned him for accidentally touching him. Being Dalit acquired another meaning for him at 26 when a relative gifted him a biography of Dalit icon B.R. Ambedkar.

"The book changed my lifestyle, my habits and my thinking," he says, "I became an avid reader, developed critical thinking, a thirst for knowledge and a desire to help others like me." An association with the Bahujan Samaj Party, meetings with Kanshi Ram, and voraciously reading about Jyotiba Phule, Sahu Maharaj and Periyar followed. In Mumbai, he briefly started a Telugu Bahujan Welfare Society, but it did not last long. In 1999, he shifted to the United States and decided it was time to do something for the Dalit community. Starting a scholarship for bright students seemed easier than starting a school. The Ambedkar Scholarships were born in '03, with two humble scholarships of Rs 5,000 each for Dalit students who passed class X with first class marks. The following year, the number of scholarships went up to 24. Last year, 37 students benefited from the scheme. This year the numbers will go up to 50. "I'm willing to expand the scholarship to other states provided I can find reliable volunteers," he says. This year there will be a special scholarship for children from families whose occupation is scavenging.

The groundwork for the scholarship is done by a Hyderabad-based organisation Devdas Adidela, and activist P.V.V. Rao. Half the scholarships are reserved for girl students and it is ensured that the Mala and Madiga sub-castes are equally represented. Kaila hopes the small initiative will help its recipients study better. "Primary education in government schools is painfully bad," he says, "I know children who cannot read and write in



Kaila (inset), sowing the seeds of equality

*The scholarships are a motivation for Dalit students to overcome the discrimination they face in school.*

their native language even after the 10th grade." Those attending a government school are preferred since they tend to be poorer, he adds. Applicants are judged on the basis of merit, economic status and what they hope to achieve through education?

For some Dalit students about to enter college, the one-time scholarship provides some measure of financial support. But more than that, it recognises their merit and encourages them. The subtle and not-so-subtle forms of discrimination that Dalit students face in school have been a prime motivation behind the exercise. "I was discouraged to go to school by my high school teachers," says Kaila, "and I still remember those incidents and tell my children about them." Says professor Kancha Iliah, who was the chief guest at the '05 award ceremony, "Such a scheme supports a conscious yearning to succeed against all odds."

Being a Dalit Christian, Kaila did not benefit from reservation but recognises its importance: "Without reservations, Dalits would not be in the position they are now. Reservations are important for Dalits to become part of the mainstream. Dalit is dignity," says Kaila. ■

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