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ENGAGED CIRCLE

education

## Change Makers Inc

Benjamin Kaila has transformed a hundred dalit lives. **SHOBHITA NAITHANI** tracks his visionary story

BY THE time Benjamin Kaila had turned 10, experience had taught him what it meant to be a dalit: that touching an upper caste was sacrilege. As a student of Class 5, Kaila had accidentally tapped the hand of an examiner who had come to inspect the school. What followed was severe cane-whipping by the inspector.

Three decades later, Kaila's elder son, Paul, is the lead designer for the Robotics team in his school in Los Angeles and his younger son Andrew, wants to be a paleontologist — career prospects unheard of at a time when Kaila would have to walk for miles, through passages used for defecation and dumping of dead animals, to reach his Telugu-medium school in Andhra Pradesh's Guntur district.

So when Kaila, 47, moved to the US in 1999 with his family, the software consultant decided to help students who were bright but belonged to socially, educationally, and economically backward communities (especially dalits). In 2003, with the help of two friends in Hyderabad, he started the Ambedkar Scholarships in the memory of his parents.

To begin with there were two scholarships of Rs 5,000 each, for Dalit students who passed class 10 with first class marks. The following year, the number of scholarships went up to 23. In 2007, 99 students were awarded the scholarship. This year, the number will cross 100. Applicants are judged on the basis of merit, economic status and an essay, with a preference for children from government schools and a 50 percent reservation for girls. For students, the scholarship offers not only financial, but moral support as well.

Panga Ramesh, 20, the son of a daily wage labourer is now studying medicine at Osmania Medical College, Hydera - bad. "My mother earns Rs 200 a day. It was with the scholarship that I could afford my Class 12 books," says the 2005 awardee.

Like his parents, both elementary school teachers, Kaila, as a child, decided to be an educator. "I had seen that, as teachers, my parents were respected — however little — despite being dalits," he says. So after a BSc from a Guntur college, Kaila enrolled himself for a Bachelor in Education diploma. At 26, Kaila moved to Hyderabad for a computer course. "It was this trip that turned my life around," he recalls. A relative gifted him a copy of Dalit icon BR Ambedkar's biography. Prior to that episode, Ambedkar was known to Kaila as only the 'Father of the Constitution'. After reading Ambedkar, Kaila says he became "selfless". An association with the Bahujan Samaj Party followed. He met Kanshi Ram and started a Telugu Bahujan Welfare Society while working in the IT industry. He quit and moved to the US in 1999.

SINCE 2003, Kaila has added several small projects to the ongoing scheme. Scholarships have been extended to children from scavenging families, microloans to those looking to start a small-scale business, financial help to victims of caste atrocities and awards to Dalit trendsetters. In 2007 Kaila registered an NGO, Friends for Education International in US.

As Kaila prepares for the sixth Ambedkar Awards ceremony, scheduled for April 2009, he recalls: "My grandfather used to burn dead bodies at the cremation ground. I tell my children that had I not educated myself, I would have done the same and it would have been passed down to them." But the reality is that Kaila is a changemaker and will continue to transform lives.

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