



The ABC of progress

Surendra Kaushik's philanthropy is based on a simple premise: Educate a woman, and you empower a nation

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While growing up in the ultra-traditional small town of Malsisar, 35 miles away from Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan, Surendra Kaushik discovered that boys had all the opportunities they wanted. Girls, in contrast, had none.

Thus, while his parents scrimped and saved and struggled to send Kaushik and his two brothers to college, his sister was taken out of school after she finished eighth grade, and was married off at 14.

The memory continued to haunt Kaushik as he moved to the United States and progressed in life, ending up as professor at Pace University's Lubin School of Business in White Plains, New York. And with the memories came the question he increasingly began to ask himself: What was he going to do about it?

"We know the value of education very well," Kaushik says. "We came to America and got opportunities because of our education."

That thought produced the solution; Kaushik established the Mrs Helena Kaushik Women's College in Malsisar – the only such institution in a 15 mile radius. The college, which will complete a decade of existence in 2009, is designed as a post-graduate college for women.

Mahatma Gandhi, who used his education to inspire a nation and propel it to freedom, has remained a lifelong inspiration -- as have three women. "My grandmother Parvati was the most respected and generous lady in our village. My mother Ratni worked tirelessly for the family. And on her first morning in India, my wife Helena went to complain to the head of the World Health Organization chapter in New Delhi about open sewers and heaps of garbage, and spoke to him about the danger of a potential plague that the WHO should do something about. The common element to all four is that they cared deeply about people."

In picking a site to establish the college, the choice of his home town was a no-brainer. The area is poverty stricken, and 90 percent of the students come from poor and lower caste families. As the example of his own sister indicated, opportunities for women to fulfill their academic potential are not just limited, they are non-existent.

Kaushik established the Helena Kaushik Foundation in the United States as a private charity, and used it to run his project. The state government of Rajasthan provided 30 acres of land on a hundred-year lease. While discussing the many trials he had to face, Kaushik points out that the order for the land came on the day the college was being inaugurated. Prior to that, he had to resist the demands of a particular minister for a bribe in order to make the land available; it was only the personal intervention of then chief minister, Ashok Gehlot that finally broke the deadlock.

The college was established at the cost of approximately \$3.5 million for the building and infrastructure, with the Kaushiks contributing half that amount. It is fully accredited by Rajasthan University, and in its years of operation, it has registered a pass percentage of 96 per cent against the national average of 40 percent at the post graduate level. The college thus far has graduated 600 students; half of those who pass out have typically opted to study even further, while the others find little difficulty in landing good jobs.

Students are drawn from over 65 villages and hamlets in



Surendra Kaushik welcomes Acharya Mahaprajna, spiritual leader of the Terapanthi Jains at Mrs Helena Kaushik Women's College, Malsisa, Rajasthan

the area as well as from the neighboring states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, which lack such facilities. Over 90 percent of the students belong to the disadvantaged scheduled castes and tribes and other backward classes, with very low incomes.

The college has built its facilities across 85,000 sq ft, comprising classrooms, a library, an art gallery, laboratories for teaching and research, a 30-bed guesthouse and a 100-bed residence for the students. Courses are offered in history, political science, psychology, geography, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biotechnology and microbiology.

All classrooms boast high speed Internet connections. Sports facilities include an Olympic-size running track, a basketball court, two tennis courts, volleyball, badminton facilities and field hockey and soccer fields.

Education is free to 15 percent of the annual intake; these students are the poorest of the poor. The other students pay for board, lodging and books, and the baseline payment works out to about Rs 5000.

Kaushik raises the \$200,000 annual operating cost through appeals, benefit concerts and philanthropic contributions.

His long term vision, Kaushik says, is for the college to become a full-fledged women's university. "I hope 10 percent of all Indians have a college level education by 2040 and half of them are women," he says, articulating his fondest dream.

Kaushik was impelled to make it a women's-only college not only because he remembered the experience of his own sister, but because he realized that in such a traditional environment, parents would resist sending their daughters to a mixed college. Prior to his project, there was no high school exclusively for girls, and this resulted in a high drop-out rate as girls reached the age of puberty.

His college boasts a high fence, and gates that are guarded all the time. Visitors from the West have been critical, arguing that it is time Indian men learnt to respect their women. 'One of the things we learned is that apparently the men of India need a lot of education in how to treat the opposite sex,' Ginny Steel, in whose house Kaushik lived as a student in the 70s, said after a visit to the college in 2004. 'This is because women in India feel chronically unsafe. Families feel that their daughters must not go out unchaperoned. So the first thing Surendra had to do was to build this wall and keep it guarded so that parents would allow their daughters to attend the college.'

"Cultural barriers are fast breaking down as parents and grandparents who are mostly farmers or smalltime busi-

ness people have begun to appreciate the value of education and are ready to postpone the marriage of their daughters," Kaushik notes with considerable pride. "It is exhilarating to know that the 10 to 20 percent of students who are already married, some with children, have resumed their higher education."

Tragically Helena Pokornicki, a registered nurse when Kaushik married her in 1973, and who has visited Malsisar at least five times since, is yet to see the college that bears her name. She was paralyzed in 1991 following a stroke, and still continues to suffer from its debilitating effects. For close to 17 years now Kaushik, 64, has been caring for her at his home, with some professional help.

Awards have come his way in some profusion: the Aruna Asaf Ali Sadhbhavana Award of the Minorities League of India; the Hind Rattan Award of the NRI Society of India; the Parashuram Samman award from the Brahmin Samaj Vikas Samiti, Jhunjhunu...

And yet the greatest reward, he says, is the knowledge that in his own small way he has been able to make a difference to the women of his home town, and through his work break down a generations-old thought process that deemed that girls were not deserving of education.

"There appears to be a very strong causal relationship between college education and the economic standing of a country, as we appreciate the United States at the top of the world economy with 25 percent of its population with college degrees," he pointed out in an article. 'But in India, higher education is limited to 4.5 percent of the population, and only a little more than 1.5 percent of women have achieved college degrees. This figure is even smaller in Rajasthan.

'If a woman has a college education, she will be in a decision-making position at home, on the farm, in business, in government. Chances are that her children will also be educated. She may avoid marrying at the peak of fertility age of 17 to 25, thus aiding population control. It is worth noting that the two percent of all Indians who have a college degree have contributed so enormously to the recent development and growth of the Indian economy.'

"There is no more important resource in the world than human capital," Kaushik said, summing up his underlying philosophy, "and a college is the highest level where one creates and disseminates the capital of human knowledge."