

# ThePrint

## Ratna Viswanathan—retired civil servant is making government schools joyful places to learn

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For Ratna Viswanathan, the Indian civil service was exciting and challenging. But there was this “constant nagging feeling” of something being amiss. After 21 years of service in high-profile departments such as the Ministry of Defence, and Prasar Bharati where she was senior general manager of finance, Viswanathan quit the great Indian bureaucracy. “I wasn’t sure if I was making a direct impact on people,” she says.

Today, at the age of 60, Viswanathan has found her calling, one that speaks to her drive to help others. The same drive had fed civil service as a college student and it propels her to do more when others are enjoying their retirement.

The former civil servant—from the 1987 batch of the Indian Audit and Accounts Service—wants to bring change to the government education sector. And she is doing it as the India head of Reach to Teach (RTT), a non-government organisation, founded in 2003, by London-based investor Sanjeev Gandhi.

Currently, it’s partnering with Haryana, Arunachal and Gujarat governments to improve the quality of education in state-run schools.

“I realised in government you could only do so much. There is a limitation in bureaucracy. There is massive learning there, but having said that, you also want to utilise this somewhere,” says Viswanathan.

After years of wheeling, wrangling and wheedling with people, departments, and corporates in private and public sectors, Viswanathan is the best person to head the India operations of RTT. What’s more, her learning curve has not flattened.

“When I moved to the development sector, it wasn’t difficult as I was attuned to move quickly and learn fast. This is all so new to me and fascinating and I am completely in love with this space,” she says.

At the same time, she is moving on the familiar ground working with governments. She understands the labyrinthine bureaucracy with its red tape and files.

But then, Viswanathan never believed in fighting against the currents.

“For such programmes [ related to the development sector-yes], you can’t battle with the government. You need to align and work with them to expand outreach and scale.”

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## **Pursuit of joy**

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Before she was headhunted by RTT in 2020, Viswanathan was with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Since leaving the bureaucracy in 2008, Viswanathan has taken on several key positions across national and international organisations. She was Oxfam India’s directions operator for nearly four years before moving on to an NGO and then to the microfinance sector. She was the CEO of the Microfinance Institutions Network comprising MFIs registered with the Reserve Bank of India.

In the less than three years that Viswanathan has been at the helm, RTT has expanded its reach from Gujarat to Haryana and Arunachal Pradesh.

The former bureaucrat, who is based out of Gurugram is excited with the NGO’s plans to expand the programme to two more Northeast states. And their governments are open to new ideas. “Northeast has been largely left out of conversations but now there is so much scope for those states. The current dispensation is working actively in the Northeast and the governments there, too, are receptive,” she says.

It’s her collaborative approach to initiatives, and not just her contacts in the bureaucracy that opens doors. Samit Ghosh, a former colleague and founder of Ujjivan Financial Services Limited, describes Viswanathan as a team player.

“She is a vivacious person with whom I had an opportunity to work when she was in microfinance. She can get a team to work together, she’s not a top-down kind of a person,” says Ghosh.

It's a skill that has held her in good stead in her current profile.

In its early years, RTT limited itself to working with out-of-school tribal children in remote areas of Gujarat. It later introduced mobile schools for tribal children in Valsad village in the state but soon started setting up Learning Resource Centres in rural communities. Primary teachers from the United Kingdom trained and supported para-teachers in these centres, states RTT website.

Viswanathan wants to bring joy into government school classrooms. It's that ephemeral, elusive emotion that has no space in the rigid accounting world of profit and loss. But if anyone can do it, it's Ratna Viswanathan, say her former bureaucrat colleagues.

"She was one of the brightest and efficient officers while she was in the service," says Sangeeta Choure, who was her batchmate back in 1987 batch. Both did their training in auditing and accounting together.

"She is a very warm and affectionate person. This quality perhaps makes it easy for her to work with children and that's why she has chosen this line," Choure adds.

It's easy to paint classrooms in bright colours and install slides in playgrounds. But paint fades with time. And installations on playgrounds, if not maintained, can start to rust.

A teacher uses a puppet in a new concept named 'Project Udaan' in Government Model Sanskriti Primary School in Sector 20 – Panchkula, Haryana on 12 July 2022. | Anindito Mukherjee.

"The whole focus is making learning joyful because the assumption in government schools is that once the infrastructure is done, that is enough. There is no decided focus on anything else. Our approach is why can't government schools be joyful places to learn?" says Viswanathan.

For her, joyful learning is not about a state-of-the-art infrastructure but planting small innovations—like seeds that hold the promise of a bountiful harvest. The focus is on training teachers how to deliver lessons with songs, placards, Lego blocks and abacus beads. RTT gives training to teachers on how to make lesson plans enjoyable.

"It is not just for students but even teachers should enjoy teaching. They are used as post offices. Curriculum, textbooks, syllabus is pre-decided somewhere else and teachers are asked to just teach," Viswanathan adds.

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## **New elements of teaching**

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Viswanathan has her work cut out for her. Experts have long pointed to the gaps in the public education system.

The 2022 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), for instance, found little difference in the learning trajectories of students. “A majority of children are reaching Grade VIII without being sufficiently equipped with foundational literacy and numeracy skills, let alone higher-level capabilities,” the report stated. An “overambitious” curriculum and the “linear age-grade organisational structure of Indian schools” result in children being left behind.

To address this problem, RTT is focusing on experiential learning and activity-based learning by re-writing lesson plans.

Teacher using school readiness programme for activity based learning Arunachal Pradesh | Special arrangement

“We are not touching curriculum or syllabus but just re-writing the content to make learning fun. There is a whole element of touch, see, hear, which will excite both teachers and students,” says Viswanathan.

RTT works directly with the central and state governments to design this ‘content’. What’s interesting is that it makes no urban-rural divisions. Teachers are also trained to assess the learning gaps in a child’s education. Apart from teachers, RTT also imparts leadership training to principals.

Education expert and program officer at Mumbai-based NGO Praja Foundation, Hasan Nizami, says these are still experiments under progress. “Professors and teachers are trying hard to adopt innovative methods in their teaching, but most of them are experiments. It is not wrong to experiment with new things. But we also need to look for methods that are tried and tested, and which may help in the overall development of students.”

(Edited by Ratan Priya )

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