

The joy of perseverance

As Anand Kumar's success story hits the book shelves, the 'super' achiever shares his formula with us

History is replete with stories of people emerging strong and successful when faced with adverse circumstances. But then there are some rare and remarkable ones among them who stand apart. The reason is their earnest attempt to help others faced with similar situation. Anand Kumar, a mathematics teacher, who runs the successful Super 30 programme, is one such.

Recently in news with the release of his biography *Super 30: Anand Kumar* (Penguin) by Canada-based psychiatrist Biju Mathew, this soft-spoken and modest teacher who has changed several lives, ironically, could not study in Cambridge University despite having secured a place. The reason was lack of finances and his father's sudden demise. When circumstances became worse, monetary needs forced him to run a mathematics coaching centre and sell papads prepared by his mother in the evening.

Yet undeterred by life's disappointments, Kumar went on to set up an innovative school in 2002 to prepare 30 underprivileged students for the coveted Indian Institute of Technology-Joint Entrance Examination. Selected purely on the basis of a written test, these students from economically backward sections were tutored and provided study materials and lodging for a year. Kumar recalls: "Having perceived a burning desire among these children to become engineers irrespective of their background, I was determined not to allow them to suffer as I did. Also I was constantly inspired by my father's trait of helping everybody irrespective of their caste, creed and economic status."

This initiative achieved astonishing success from the word go with a majority of the students making it to the premier institution while remaining getting admitted in other prestigious engineering colleges. In the last 14 years, thrice 100 per cent success was achieved while this year, 28 have qualified for the IIT. Unlike other teachers, Kumar willingly shares his experience. "I do not claim to have a success formula. I essentially teach them to be innovative, work hard and develop patience and a positive outlook. Most importantly, I instil in them a thirst for knowledge." Kumar qualifies aptitude as primary to be successful. Insisting that parents must try to understand what their children are cut out for, he cites his younger brother Pranav's example who was allowed to become a violin player. "Parental and peer pressure plays havoc. Following the herd has resulted in suicides among students, which is sad."

While discussing parental pressure one seeks Kumar's view on schools and coaching institutes adopting the rote approach to train students. "Making students memorise defeats the very purpose. At Super 30, we explain the rationale behind concepts and formulae. For example, for calculating the area of a triangle, different methods are taught thereby providing varied perspective to one problem. Similarly, the rationale behind equations like $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ is explained to help students appreciate logic. These go a long way in creating a life long interest in the subject and making the subject engaging and creative." Mathew's book documents the experience of several Super 30 students. All of them praise Kumar's method of teaching, his devotion, hard work and innovativeness. But more than all this they are thankful for the confidence he instilled in them.

Kumar laments that non-adherence of proper teaching methods have stifled research and development in the country. On pointing out the lack of qualified faculty in institutions, he agrees. "It is imperative to raise the standards of teaching, the profession needs to be elevated in stature making it prestigious and remunerative to attract talent. It is such an irony that parents want the best teachers to help their children become doctors, engineers and MBAs but not teachers."

Kumar says though initially he started the Super 30 initiative to help him overcome his grief at not being able to attend Cambridge now it has acquired a new dimension. "I now desire to create infrastructure and facilities that will support children devoid of economic means to pursue any stream of education and not just engineering." Tall order, isn't it? Not for Kumar. "Sincerity is the key. Dedication can overcome all obstacles," he answers confidently, adding, "Super 30 is a standing example." What probably adds to Kumar's confidence is that 90 per

cent students of the Super 30 have made efforts to teach others in their villages and cities. Looking at the timeframe of next 10 years, Kumar intends to gradually increase the Super number to 50 to 100 and 200. He is also looking at harnessing technology and IT to reach out to villages and small towns.

Success of Super 30 students has made a difference not just in the life of these individuals and their families. “It has had a far-reaching effect in the sense that it has changed the mind-set of the people and given them hope.” Giving an example, he states that 20 years ago a driver would serve to keep his employer happy not just to ensure continuation of the job but also with the hope that one day his son would be gainfully employed with his master. “Now a rickshawwallah, a vendor or a driver has pitched his hopes higher. Having realised the importance of education, they are willing to go to any length to educate their children including selling their land and belongings. Super 30 *ne garib mata aur pita ki umeed jagayi hai* (Super 30 has raised hope among poor parents).”

In fact, the Kumar effect has percolated to other regions too. Copying his model, institutes have sprung up in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh to help youngsters qualify ITI and banking examinations free of charge. Kumar’s elation is not because of replication of Super 30 model. “I feel good that people are making an effort to contribute to the betterment of the have-nots. Their work goes to emphasise that lack of money cannot come in the way of success.”

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