

Views | How Indian children are not encouraged to tinker

Design thinking comes only if you get your hands dirty and learn to build things at an early age

Farah Rahman

Indians do not have a DIY culture. Perhaps it harkens back to the caste system which makes it clear that the upper castes shouldn't dirty their hands.

It is a pity that we grow up having to rely on others to do even the smallest bits of carpentry or electrical jobs.



In the US, I was always amazed how many Americans, in all walks of life, could simply roll up their sleeves and attack plumbing, car or electrician type problems with ease. I once knew a lawyer who, just for fun, would move a staircase to another part of the house or build a deck over the weekend.

Design thinking comes only if you get your hands dirty and learn to build things at an early age.

Unlike their American counterparts, few Indian children grow up exposed to hands on tinkering.

Very few Indian children grow up making toys from kits. City kids may have the occasional aunt or uncle returning from abroad with kits. Some get lucky and have the advantage of an adult with a passion for tinkering who will take the time to engage and instill the same passion in them. Catch them young you know.

So on my recent trip to God's own country, I was pleasantly surprised to meet the unassuming and energetic MRK Menon who heads Aero-sports. Based in Thrissur, Kerala, it is the kind of business geared to empower children and get them exposed to and interested in science. What's even better is that it also addresses one of India's most pressing problems - job creation.

Menon, 55, is a US national who returned to settle in India in 2009. Being a New Yorker at heart, he keeps busy. Apart from being CEO of Aero-sports, he is a consultant in aero-modelling, career counseling and management education. He is a guest faculty at many educational institutions and is also the Secretary of the Rotary Club of Thrissur.

While across the pond, his area of specialization was Credit and Operations Management. There he worked with various MNCs like Xerox, Novartis, Penguin USA, Prada, NYU, Bloomberg, etc.

Menon's company, Aero-sports, provides aero model airplane kits for kids to build in school. Aero-modeling fulfills a real demand in the CBSE curriculum where kids are required to do an extra curricular activity. Schools are charged Rs2,500 - 3,000 per student per year for 25 Classes which is in line with CBSE requirements.

Watching Menon wind up the propellor on his Chipmunk model, throw it up and see it fly around his office was a delightful experience. This is the kind of seemingly simple technology that needs no power or internet that will capture the imagination of kids everywhere especially in rural India.

Kids get real gyan while toying around like learning Bernouli's theorem. Engineering students are welcome to his offices where they work on projects which give them hands on work experience. While I was there, I saw Jet Engines and Multi Stage Rockets being assembled.

Menon is also obsessed with creating jobs. His plan is to create 1000 Entrepreneurs and 100,000 Aero-modelling Instructors who will get assigned to various schools.

He has come out with a unique Franchise Model where no commissions are payable to the franchisor. The entrepreneur keeps all the profits after paying a franchise fee of Rs1,25,000. Franchisees are trained extensively to build their own businesses and approach schools to offer aero modeling as their extra curricular activity.

Build it but will they come? Yes, so far twenty five franchises across India. Of course, the kids are allright with it everywhere. And yes, the sky is the limit. Here's to a new generation of Indians who love to get their hands dirty. Now that is something to cheer about.

As for Menon, he has started model airplane training for his two and a half year old grandson and his next project is building the world's first radio control models museum. Stay tuned.

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[DIY culture](#)

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