

The Bija Project

Zachary Hindin
Nanubhai Education Foundation
Summer 2010 - Spring 2011

Abstract

My project aims to lay the foundations for a long-term program that would supplement Nanubhai's flagship Teaching Fellowship. My point of departure in designing this program is that several attributes of the Teaching Fellowship make it an effort which is necessary, but ultimately insufficient to empower rural Indian schools towards self-sufficiency. This project is expressly designed to foster a synergy between Indian and American teachers which will comprehensively set participating communities on the road to self-sustaining development.

Below, I will summarily provide: (a) a project description; and (b) a general statement of need. Beyond detailed elaborations of these two sections, directions for further research include a budget, a timeline, and an organization-specific case for why the Nanubhai Education Foundation ought to take up the Bija Project. Since the project is presently hypothetical, outstanding questions of methodology, staffing, administration, and oversight will be largely ancillary. Nevertheless, with concrete commitment and funding from the Foundation, these concerns will be respectively addressed as needed.

Project Description

Taking its name from the Hindi word for *seed*, the Bija Project seeks to improve rural education in India from the ground up. Acknowledging that top-down reform is not only necessary but also painfully slow to pass, the Bija Project would plant in rural communities a vanguard of native teachers who will have completed **a fully-funded postgraduate degree in education** in which they spend considerable time specializing in curriculum design and teaching methodology. Qualifying teachers will complete their training at either a premier Indian institution or, circumstances allowing, an M. Ed. program in the United States. At the terminus of their degree-granting program, teachers will **"pay back" the investment in their education by applying their skills in rural classrooms** (preferably situated in their home communities) for a period of four years.

The vision of the Bija Project hinges on the belief that - when provided new intellectual tools, cutting edge pedagogical skills and strategic employment positions - **ordinary native teachers** who have experienced the status quo of rural India's outmoded education system can and will be bona fide **agents of progress** in their communities.

Very broadly, the program would proceed in three stages

1. Selection of Bija Scholars

The ideal candidate for a Bija Scholarship would be a **young**, demonstrably **talented**, and preferably though not necessarily **female** teacher who has considerable firsthand experience in a rural Indian education system. The candidate ought to have less than

five years cumulative teaching experience. The Bija Project is looking for teachers who are **fluent, not invested, in the status quo system**. In their application, prospective Scholars ought to demonstrate a **commitment to rural youth empowerment and/or social justice through education**.

2. **Completion of higher education at participating Bija Project institutions**

Prior to its first application round, the Bija Project will need to search out and create scholarship opportunities for Bija Scholars at premier postgraduate education programs in India and/or the United States. Schools with **established education degree programs, large endowments, substantial international student bodies, and historical commitments to social justice** ought to be targeted and lobbied heavily to this end. Pending funding for the Bija Project (ostensibly from grants and private donors), schools must be convinced to defer a considerable, if not the sum total cost of tuition, room and board for the duration of one masters degree (generally, 1-2 years depending on the duration various programs).

During the tenure of the Scholar's academic program, there ought to be regular contact between Bija Scholars and education specialists/teachers at Nanubhai. It is imperative that any lessons learned in the classroom are framed within the context of target destinations in rural India. **A bi-annual summit of Nanubhai teachers and Bija Scholars would be a vital opportunity not only to establish a continuity between theory and praxis, but also to prepare both groups to personally grow in their praxis**. Moreover, these exchanges would serve to give Bija scholars a more personal sense of their long-term commitment, concretizing that indispensable understanding that post-graduation, Bija Scholars will serve as Bija Teachers in rural India for a duration of four years.

3. **Deployment of Bija Teachers to posts in rural India**

From the outset, Bija Scholars will have to sign onto a **contractual obligation** to the Bija Project and (by extension) the Nanubhai Education Foundation, duly honored and legally enforceable both in India and the United States. (Note: in the event that a Bija Scholar should study in the United States, they must be invited on a J-1 Student Visa which expires conterminously with their academic program. In this arrangement, the mandate to return will be especially clear).

Once Bija Teachers have moved to their teaching posts, their responsibilities will be threefold:

- (1) Teach **academic classes** as assigned.
- (2) Teach **supplemental spoken English/professional competency classes**, which ought to be open to all in the community, five days per week.
- (3) Work with Nanubhai Teaching Fellows in the field to...
 - (a) **Design and facilitate 'Best Practices' programs for other local teachers**. These should be held once per week and attended exclusively

programs will aim to, in due time, instill in local teachers the same skillful approaches in which the Bija Teacher gained fluency over the course of her postgraduate studies. Programs ought to be **conducted in the local dialect** to maximize comprehension. The goal of these programs is to **ensure that Nanubhai's investment in a Bija Scholar yields an exponential - not additive - return** to targeted rural education systems.

(b) **Develop an aggressive campaign advocating top-down educational reforms** at the local, state and/or national levels by highlighting specific critical needs 'on the ground' which are not being met by the State. **Teachers need to develop those core competencies which are needed not only in the classroom, but also in public advocacy on behalf of themselves, their students and their schools.** Massive bureaucratic sprawl and trenchant corruption has made India's democracy highly inaccessible to those who stand to gain the most from it. Within this group, children tend to be at the fore. Since most of India's public servants tend to be out of touch with the realities of the rural classroom, Bija Teachers will be well-positioned to serve as a lifeline between these disenfranchised communities and those responsible for steering Indian policy and delegating resources.