BAI

By Piali Banerjee

IT professionals bring cheer and computers to slum kids

MUMBAI: All teachers are, by definition, 'friends of young minds'. But what sets this group of educationists apart is that it has chosen to befriend those young minds which flower on the other side of the great divide produced by the IT Age. It has promised allegiance to children in societies which do not have access to computers and so find it a little more difficult to keep pace with the Age. And that's all that these educationists are willing to introduce themselves as — simply 'Friends of Young Minds'. Or sometimes, just the acronym FOYM.

The organisation's committed volunteer base comprises professors and students from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and several other engineering colleges across Mumbai. Volunteers who work in anonymity, propelled by the sheer excitement of seeing more and more young minds discover the joys of the computer.

FOYM was set up in 1996 by a group of Indian students at Rice University, Houston, US. It started with the simple aim of collecting and repairing old computers from organisations and individuals in the US, and channelising them to schools in India which could not, otherwise, afford them. Later, when these students returned to India to take up positions in various colleges and organisations, FOYM shifted to Mumbai, though it still maintains an active chapter at Houston.

Today, computers come, not only from the US but also from corporate houses and individual donors in Mumbai. Some of the recipient schools include Nakwa High School and Jawaharnagar School in Thane, St Joseph's School in Kapurbawdi, some small NGO-run schools in Kolhapur and Phulenagar, the Kattabettu School in Nilgiri and schools in places like Balia, Hardoi and Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh.

The modus operandi of FOYM is to approach corporate houses, libraries and universities, especially at times when these institutions go in for upgraded machines and are likely to discard old machines. Individual donations are also solicited through word of mouth. "We do try to put a couple of conditions to the school authorities that we give machines to," says a FOYM volunteer. "The most important one being that they make the computers available not only to their own students, but also to children of nearby slums, later on in the evening. The second one is that the children should be allowed a free hand to

play with the machines and pick up on their own. For if teachers get formally involved, the kids would be given tasks and forced to develop particular skills which would tone down their enthusiasm considerably. We've seen that if there is no pressure of expectations, children tend to learn quicker. Thus teachers of the recipient schools usually stay on the periphery, only ensuring that every child gets a fair chance at the machine — they only step in to help if asked."

A fairly common hurdle is, of course, the fact that in many of the schools, teachers don't know to operate computers themselves. Which is usually overcome with a couple of training sessions by FOYM volunteers. "If we can find groups of students interested in hardware in these schools, another plan on the anvil is to train them in the hands-on maintenance of the computers," says a volunteer. "That way every school will not have to come back to us in case of problems and we will be able to move on faster."

When it comes to learning software, the kids are very enthusiastic. A volunteer recounts an incident at the Phulenagar school, where he was once mobbed by a whole group of excited children, with each child eager to show off his or her newly learnt computer skills. "One of them came up and started a swift rattle on the keyboard and before I could blink, he had some 15 lines

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY: Municipal school kids get cyber savvy, thanks to the Friends of Young Minds

typed on the screen," he smiles. "He had actually created 15 directory commands on DOS and changed directory names 15 times in a jiffy! These are the moments which validate all the struggle that we sometimes have to face at the bureaucratic level."

The struggle consists mainly of getting Customs clearance for the shipments of computers which

come from the US. For, it's not always easy to get past people's suspicions of whether all the computers received are used for charitable purposes or not. Now there has been an order where Customs duty is waived for computers going to government schools. "But this order is not really fair, for it shuts out all the small NGO-run schools which could do with computers too," complains a volunteer.

FOYM doesn't solicit funds as an organisation, preferring to deal only with computers. The idea being that if there is an expenditure (like Customs duty or transportation), a few volunteers pay up individually. "In order to ease things a bit, FOYM has recently entered a memorandum of understanding with the Department of Education of Maharashtra, which says that once FOYM uses its contacts and gets machines, the Department will do its bit to help deploy them," he informs.

These friends of young minds have ambitious plans for the future. Which include the upgradation of machines and gathering volunteers to write software specially designed for their users. And, of course, watching more and more young minds light up with learning. ∎