

CITY'S QUIET DOERS

Substance over spectacle; these five quietly proved that small, sustained acts can rewrite entire communities' futures permanently

Bindu Gopal Rao

Forget the grand gestures. The real change-makers are out there fixing one dialysis fund, one school roof, one startup pitch, one wheelchair-turned-livelihood at a time, and barely pausing to take credit.

This is a story about scale built from smallness: a foundation, a couple, a homemaker, a programme manager, all stitching together dignity, opportunity, and second chances across India's classrooms, hospitals, and waste yards.

None of them set out to be heroes. They just kept showing up. Meet the quiet architects of seismic change.

One idea, fifteen states

Mekin Maheshwari knows what it feels like to be trapped inside a system built only for right answers. Years spent grinding for the IIT entrance exams taught him plenty about cracking tests, and almost nothing about failure, risk, or original thought.

"There wasn't room to experiment, make decisions, or learn from failure," he says of those years. That gap stayed with him long after the grades came in, eventually following him into a high-flying stint at Flipkart, and finally pushing him to do something about it.

In 2017, he co-founded Udhyan Learning Foundation, betting on a simple, almost rebellious idea. "The idea came from a combination of personal conviction, research, and my experience at Flipkart; that entrepreneurial thinking can be learnt and impacts lives deeply," he explains.

That bet has paid off at a scale few would've predicted. Udhyan Shiksha now works inside government school systems across 15 states, reaching a staggering 4.7 million students a year through over 11,500 schools and 50,000 teachers, helping them build "qualities like initiative, problem-solving, resilience, and ownership through hands-on learning experiences."

In Uttarakhand alone, nearly 80 per cent of its students are first-generation learners

— kids for whom these words were never classroom vocabulary before.

The numbers are wild - 2.5 million business and problem-solving ideas generated by students who were never told their ideas counted.

But Maheshwari isn't chasing statistics. He's chasing moments.

"We've seen students who were once reluctant to speak up in class go on to lead teams, pitch ideas, take on challenges in their communities, and win statewide recognition for their initiatives," he says. "For many of them, it's the first time they realise that their ideas matter and that they can create change around them. That shift in confidence and agency is incredibly powerful to witness," he adds.

No flashy disruption here, just one man, one stubborn conviction, and a nation's worth of children learning that their ideas matter.

Dignity isn't optional

Some revolutions don't arrive with noise. They arrive with a wheelchair that finally lets someone earn a living, or a reading device that opens up a textbook for a child who'd never accessed one before. That's the quiet ground AssisTech Foundation has been working on, and the scale it has reached is anything but small.

ATF's mission reads simple on paper - make sure disability never decides whether someone learns, earns, or lives independently. In practice, it has meant building an entire ecosystem from scratch, pulling together innovators, startups, corporates, government bodies, NGOs, and the disability community itself, all working toward solutions that actually reach people, not just pitch decks.

"What started as a small effort has today grown into India's largest Assistive Technology (AT) ecosystem," says **Prateek Madhav**, CEO & Co-Founder, ATF. The foundation backs AT startups with mentorship, funding, market access, and partnerships, the unglamorous scaffolding that turns a clever prototype into something that actually changes a life.

The results - over 10 lakh persons with disabilities impacted, 65 startups supported, and more than 100 AT products developed, spanning mobility, communication, education, employment, and independent living.

Behind those numbers are very specific lives. Trestle Labs has opened up information and education to over 1.7 lakh visually impaired individuals through reading technology. NeoMotion has handed wheelchair users not just mobility but livelihoods. Over 1,000 persons with disabilities now earn as delivery partners across 12 cities. Eye-D has given more than 70,000 visually impaired users the tools for independent navigation and daily life.

"For me, this work is not just about technology. It is about dignity, opportunity, and inclusion," Madhav says, adding, "Every time a child gains access to education, a person secures employment, or someone becomes more independent because of an assistive solution, it reinforces why this work matters." No grand declarations, just one foundation, one ecosystem, and a million quiet wins.

From childhood to livelihood

Some legacies are built in boardrooms. This one is being built in classrooms, hospital wards, and rural training centres, quietly, since 1999.

That's when Kumari Shibulal and **S.D. Shibulal** set up Shibulal Family Philanthropic Initiatives (SFPI). "Both Kumari and I strongly believe that education has the power to transform lives," says S.D. Shibulal, co-founder.

The mission - long-term, strategic support across education, paediatric healthcare, organic farming, and art and culture, pointing at one national

goal, lifting India's Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education by 50 per cent by 2035.

The programmes read like a checklist of who usually gets left out. Vidyarakshak offers honour-based scholarships to children of martyrs from forces like BSF, CRPF, ITBP, SSB, and Assam Rifles. V-Able Vidyadhan funds undergraduate education for students with disabilities.

Ankur takes children from poor backgrounds all the way from primary school to employment; childhood to livelihood, under one roof. SAATHIYA builds hospitality careers for rural youth who never had access to conventional academic routes, backed by a five-year, high-touch career-building model.

Then there's Shikshalokam, reshaping school leadership and public education through tech, working alongside governments, NGOs, and communities. The scale: over 4.5 lakh education leaders impacted, 7 lakh+ observations made, and 11.9 lakh+ improvement projects launched.

On the healthcare side, AyuRaksha partners with hospitals to fund life-saving surgeries, especially for children from economically weak families. Sangamam keeps traditional art forms alive by backing the artists behind them.

"At SFPI our guiding principle is about people, institutions and opportunities that can have an enduring and meaningful impact," Shibulal says. No spotlight chased - just one couple, several quiet revolutions.

Small wheels, big moves

No headlines chased, no ribbons cut for cameras. Just one homemaker showing up, year after year, for the people the system tends to forget.

Vasudha Rander is an active member of the International Inner Wheel, one of the world's largest women's service organisations, and her work sits in that unglamorous space between intention and impact. "Being able to make a difference in people's lives, no matter how small, has always been my greatest inspiration," she says.

"In small ways, we are making a significant difference in many lives."

Those small ways add up fast. Every year, the team sponsors approximately 400 free dialysis treatments for patients who can't afford them. Over the past two years, they've completely renovated four government

schools that were in a depleted state, turning them into functional, welcoming spaces where children can actually learn. There's also a standing reserve fund at St John's Hospital for emergency burn treatments, replenished every year based on use, so critical care is never delayed by an empty account.

None of it happens without friction. "One of the biggest challenges is ensuring the authenticity of beneficiaries," Rander says, which means extensive groundwork and verification before any project even begins. Bureaucracy adds its own drag, "obtaining routine approvals and permissions can be a lengthy process, leading to unnecessary delays," she notes, calling for streamlined procedures so support reaches people faster.

Individually modest, collectively lasting - that's the quiet math behind Rander's work. Four schools rebuilt, hundreds of dialysis sessions funded, a safety net for burn victims always ready. Small wheels, turning together, moving real lives forward.

99,000 tonnes, one city

Climate change rarely gets fixed by one big idea. It gets fixed by a thousand small connections - between the startup with a solution, the city official who can scale it, and the waste worker on the ground who makes it real.

That's the unglamorous work Climate KIC, a European climate innovation agency, has built its mission around, making sure good ideas don't die as just ideas.

In Bangalore, that mission has a name and a face. "I lead a programme called the Circular Economy Innovation Cluster, or CEIC for short, run together with SecondMuse, funded by the IKEA Foundation, and in partnership with the Bengaluru Science and Technology (BeST) cluster," says Parisa Khoram, Entrepreneurship Programme Manager, Climate KIC.

Her job, as she describes it, is deceptively simple: "create the right conditions for those people to connect, collaborate, and grow so that the work continues long after we are gone."

The results are anything but simple. CEIC has backed 22 ventures tackling waste streams the city had largely ignored - textiles, construction debris, organics, e-waste. Over 250 people engaged, 167 connected across the ecosystem, and 63 of those connections have grown into genuine collaborations. Not networking, but actual shared work and resources.

The climate math is striking too - ventures supported through CEIC have the potential to avoid 99,000 tonnes of CO equivalent emissions annually. But Khoram's proudest number isn't a tonnage figure.

"We have also made sure this work reaches the people who are most often left out of the conversation," she says. Five hundred ninety informal waste workers in Bangalore now working with safer conditions and real income opportunities.

No single invention here, just a city's waste economy, quietly, deliberately rewired.

