

# Geeta Dharmarajan



**BEST KNOWN FOR...** As Executive Director, Katha, she is synonymous with imparting education to under-privileged students across India

## DISRUPTION...

Geeta Dharmarajan is a writer, social entrepreneur, and educationist. An award-winning writer for children and adults, she has over 30 years of professional experience having served at the India Today Group of Companies, The University of Pennsylvania and INTACH, before she started Katha, an NGO. Her deep interest in how children and communities learn led to her starting Katha in 1988. She has to her credit the creation of Katha's unique story pedagogy and earth-friendly curriculum that help make children families into leaders. She believes that translation is a counter-divisive force in India and has made Katha a respected name in literary translation. With a special focus on underprivileged children in the slums of Delhi, Katha aims to bring about change in all aspects that affect their growth, well-being, and potential, particularly their education, and help them overcome challenges—low incomes, lack of shelter, water supply and sanitation, health, nutrition, access to quality preschools and good schools. Katha's first reading programme was launched in 1988 in partnership with UNICEF and the Government of Delhi to take it to as many children from Delhi's slums, and later the Government of Rajasthan chipped in for their schoolchildren as well. The Katha Lab School started with five children. Today it is a centre of creativity for the slum cluster it is situated in, producing professionals every

year who become entrepreneurs who support their families, or go on to higher studies. More than 80 percent of Katha's children go to college. She was honoured with the Padma Shri award in 2012 for her contributions in the field of Literature and Education.

## BUILDING INDIA'S SCHOOL OF THE FUTURE...

Maintains Geeta Dharmarajan, "Indian education, I hope, will support 21st century children with, inter alia:

1. Good books. Most of India's children still belong to a vibrant and imaginative oral traditions — one to which the millennials are returning through social media! We need all children to move with great felicity from the oral to the written word. We need stories, poems, nonfiction that celebrate the heterogeneity that is India; that enhance the joy of reading so our future leaders embrace the wisdom that quality books carry.
2. An ability to listen to others, be thoughtful. When we listen to children, we create a thinking environment that fosters imagination, innovation; and encourage them to

listen, think, ask questions, discuss, before they act.

3. Responsive and responsible classrooms: Children need a curriculum for life that has learning as its focus, not exams, and gives every child what she deserves: autonomy of thinking, caring and sharing. Teacher education must foster teacher autonomy, engagement to enhance the joy of reading.
4. Tools to help every child build a kinder world. Every single study shows that kindness, empathy, cooperation (and not competition) are the essential softer skills our children must cultivate to succeed in the mid-21st century and beyond. When reimagining education for children, we need to remember that schooling does not necessarily support learning. Schools need the courage to lead young Indians beyond schooling into curiosity, problem solving. They must help students foster equitable learning opportunities and skills for all children.
5. A proactive school community that engages with diversity. As citizens we have the onus and ownership for change. Let's build an equitable and compassionate field for all children, regardless of class/caste, thus addressing the weakest link in our education system."