



Dr Daphne Pillai
Co-Founder, Pillai Group of
Institutions and Chairperson,
Management Board, Mahatma
Education Society

Interviewed by Bhavana Doifode

Educationist Dr Daphne Pillai believes that at the heart of women's empowerment, lies the transformative power of education.

Tell us about your Pillai Group of Institutions and how does it work?

We have 48 educational institutions under the Pillai Group, from Kindergarten (KG) to Post Graduate (PG) programs in seven campuses across Maharashtra state – Mumbai, Navi Mumbai and Rasayani. We have colleges of architecture, engineering, management studies, arts, commerce and science; as also schools, international schools, junior colleges, polytechnics and teacher-training institutions. We have two international schools which function under the name of Dr Pillai Global Academy where we offer both the international curricula of the University of Cambridge (IGCSE) and the International Baccalaureate (IB) of Geneva.

What are the success mantras you adhere to?

Having being in the field for 40 years, there are some mantras that define us. We lay great emphasis on leadership through example. We are very hands-on, very approachable to all stakeholders-students, their parents, the teaching and non-teaching staff. There are no hierarchies in our institutions.

What has been the growth strategy you've set for the Pillai Group of Institutions?

From 2006 onwards, we have been taking our students to the Saint Mary's College of Business and Economics,

California, USA, for a cross-cultural exchange program where they are exposed to the working of Fortune 500 companies like Microsoft, Google, Genentech, Oracle, Paypal etc. Reciprocally, American students visit the Pillai campus for a study of Indian entrepreneurship and business models.

We have also recently collaborated with the United Nations and New York University to set up a centre of excellence dedicated to the study of urban expansion of cities across the world.

Could you please tell us about your projects for the literacy drive for women in slums?

There have been many women who missed out on education for reasons like poverty, early marriage, child marriage, far-flung distances to the school (especially in rural and tribal areas), no proper toilet facilities in these areas or for reasons like lack of family support or opportunity. For them, the second chance is a matter of simple expectations: Some basic literacy and spoken English skills, and some income generating skill.

Seeing this, we started the 'Adult Literacy Drive' for women living in slums in Chembur. Our first challenge was to create awareness and break down the mental barriers of their families. Next, we had to raise the confidence levels of these women by imparting basic literacy skills and showing them that income generation can be an achievable reality.

For the younger girls, we initiated several skill development programs from beauty care and hairstyling, to desktop printing skills, catering and hospitality. We also help the



With husband Dr K M Vasudevan Pillai

girls become entrepreneurs by negotiating with banks for loans for them.

You have won several awards and received recognition for your contribution to society and education. Tell us a little about this.

The Pillai College of Arts, Commerce and Science – which has been under my stewardship – was accredited with an 'A' Grade in the record time of six years. The college was re-accredited 'A' Grade in the year 2010. My work with



are brought to our campus for a day of learning, fun and activity. Each institution adopts a particular NGO and works with it for the whole year. We have another activity called 'Uber Rang' which is a talent drive for all our institutions.

Tell us a little about your family. My husband, Dr K M Vasudevan Pillai, is a visionary founder of the Pillai Group of Institutions. We have three children. Our eldest son Priam has completed his PhD in Mechanical Engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA. He is currently the COO of the MES, Pillai Group of Institutions.

Community service initiatives keep me going and make me realize that there is much to be done.

Soroptimist International – an international women's organisation which has consultative status in the United Nations – has received its share of recognition. The NASI (National Soroptimist International of India) honoured me with an Achiever's Award in the year 2012 in three categories – excellence in profession, social service and business.

University of Mumbai recognition at its International Commerce Conference came in the form of a citation for being a 'Spirited Woman Entrepreneur' and for empowering women and the girl child in the year 2013. In 2015, I was invited to the Soroptimist International Convention in Istanbul to share my experiences in empowering women with a second chance in education.

What drives you and keeps you going?

Community service initiatives keep me going and make me realize that there is much to be done. All our institutions have a day called 'Community Service Day'. The inmates of 70 NGOs (around 1,000 in number which include children from orphanages, shelters, *ashrams* and inmates of homes of the aged)



We had to raise the confidence levels of these women by imparting basic literacy skills and showing them that income generation can be an achievable reality.

Our next born is our daughter Minerva, who has also completed her PhD in Mechanical Engineering from the University of California, Berkeley, and is the Co-Founder of 'US Bionics', a company in California, USA, for the design of industrial exoskeleton systems.

Our youngest son Franav has completed his graduation in Economics from the University of California, Berkeley, and Master's Degree in Economics from the University of Mumbai. He is currently the Deputy CEO of the MES, Pillai Group of Institutions. He spearheads and organizes one of the biggest youth festivals of India called 'Allegría'.

How do you balance your personal and professional life?

My family is extremely supportive. We make sure that we have at least one meal together. We also make it a point to take a vacation together at least once a year. 'Me-time' is also important.

What are your future plans?

We want to start new courses and programs that are going to be relevant in the next 10 years. For example, in Panvel, we will have the airport coming up... because of which we are going to be in the middle of a lot of employment generation for this area. We have started training people so that they are able to get employed in the future.

PHOTOGRAPHS SANJIT SEN



With husband and kids Priam, Minerva and Franav

