"Largest NGO for digital learning of Indian art & culture"

An alum of Delhi University, **Tina Vachani** is Co-founder, Routes2Roots, a NGO focused on "spreading peace through cultural awareness". R2R is the first cultural NGO to be listed on the National Stock Exchange's SSE (Social Stock Exchange) platform. Excerpts from an email interview:

Routes2Roots is described as a NGO dedicated to promoting Indian art, culture and heritage among primary-secondary school students in India and abroad. What was the motivation behind promoting R2R in 2004?

Routes2Roots, as the name suggests, means 'way to our origins'. Our objective is to promote peace and harmony around the world. We believe that if we can understand and accept diverse cultures, world peace will prevail. To make this happen, we started an exchange of art and culture within India and worldwide in 2004. The results were very encouraging, and following this experience in 2016 we introduced this programme in schools with the hope that the next generation will become more tolerant and believe in an inclusive society.

Twenty years later, how satisfied are you with the progress and track record of R2R?

R2R has made significant progress in promoting arts and cultural education. Since 2004, R2R has grown to impact over 22 million students worldwide. It is the largest NGO for digital learning of Indian art and culture and recognised as such by the *Limca Book of Records*. We have established digital classrooms in all districts countrywide including the remotest areas.

In multi-lingual and multicultural India, art, culture and heritage is very diverse and covers a vast expanse. What are the focus areas of R2R?

R2R focuses on several key areas to promote art, culture, and heritage.
● To promote cultural education, we offer hybrid education programs that combine art and music to help students connect with their roots, and become well-rounded individuals.

These programs include real-time interactive digital classes and periodic visits by our teachers to schools to conduct workshops.
● R2R has established around 4,300 digital classrooms and taken the digital classes to more than 24,000 classrooms in all districts countrywide most of which are in the rural areas for less privileged students. Through interactive digital broadcasts our teachers conduct daily interactive classes in 16 disciplines such as Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Hindustani vocal, Carnatic vocal, *tabla*, harmonium, sitar, guitar, keyboard, flute, theatre, yoga, Punjabi literature, fun with art, brain development, AI-coding and also provide NCERT approved K-12 content.
● Moreover, we organise cultural programs, art exhibitions, and theatre workshops in schools to foster inter-regional tolerance and appreciation of diverse cultures with special focus on rural and under-served areas.
● R2R provides live interactive digital classes, making cultural education accessible to diverse audiences, thereby enriching the lives of millions of children.

What is the business model of R2R? What are the major sources of income and heads of expenditure?

R2R is not a business organisation. All our activities are free-of-charge for beneficiaries. Our sources of income include grants, CSR support, and donations, all transparently disclosed on our website.

One of the major objectives of R2R is to facilitate arts and cultural exchanges between SAARC nations, especially Pakistan and Bangladesh. How satisfied are you with attainment of this objective?

By facilitating art and cultural exchanges among SAARC nations, especially Pakistan and Bangladesh, we aim to promote mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation, ultimately contributing to regional peace and stability. We are fairly satisfied and proud that we have been able to sow the seeds of friendship and tolerance through cultural exchanges and by demolishing age-old misconceptions and prejudices.

To all intents and purposes, R2R is a new technologies-driven online education enterprise. But the majority of India's 1.4 million schools are not digitally connected. What's your comment?

This is a major concern. The digital divide is a significant challenge. However, promoting technology-driven online education is crucial to reach large numbers of children. Government initiatives like the National Digital Literacy Mission and the Digital India program have improved digital infrastructure in rural areas. By adopting a multifaceted approach involving government initiatives, public-private partnerships, digital literacy programs, and innovative solutions such as distributing low-cost tablets and laptops to students and teachers, we can overcome the challenge of reaching schools digitally. We reach schools lacking last-mile internet connectivity by providing them with dongles. We also provide teachers with training to effectively integrate technology into their teaching practices.

What are your future growth and expansion plans?

We have just reached about 10 percent of the country's school-going children, so 90 percent of our work remains to be done. If we add higher education institutions, we have a long way to go. Our work can be faster if our funds flow improves, but this is a slow and time-consuming process.