



SMITA VATS

Delhi's walking history guide

WHILE Delhi struggles to look like a futuristic city, Smita Vats, 44, wants young people to look at the past. Founder of Itihaas, a non-profit education society, Vats conducts study tours and walk programmes to connect Delhi's students to their history.

Itihaas' study tours to the city's many historic spots like Humayun's Tomb, Red Fort and the Walled City have pioneered heritage education in the country. These walks weave stories, tradition and culture to enable school students connect with what Vats calls their "tangible and intangible inheritance."

"We go beyond dates and architecture. It isn't just about the colour of the marble in Jama Masjid. Our walks take students to the imam's home or the artisan's workshop," explains Smita.

"Schools often stop at showing students just a monument. There is no first person attachment in the way history is taught. We weave relationships, stories and anecdotes into our modules. Urban children from nuclear families don't have elders who were like living libraries in their home anymore," she says. "They need to recognise the richness and diversity of our legacy."

Meeting young people during her travels across India as a filmmaker, she says, showed her just how imminent this danger was. "I'd find young people so alienated from their environment. Many knew more about the Berlin Wall or the Thames in London than

Turkman Gate or Ghanta Ghar in Chandni Chowk," recalls Smita, who did her Masters in Mass Communication from Jamia Milia Islamia University in 1989 after graduating in Psychology from Delhi University.

She knew films, her profession of over 18 years, couldn't bridge this gap. "Change needs to be experienced," says Smita. So, towards the end of 2004, Smita wrote a simple letter to principals of Delhi's leading schools. To her surprise, many showed keen interest even though they were worried she did not have a "historian on board."

Eventually, six schools including Delhi Public School in R K Puram, the Shri Ram School, Vasant Valley and Modern School signed up. Smita took her first group on the walk in 2005. Within the first year itself, 1,200 children, between 12 and 16, underwent the walks. "I give credit to these principals. They immediately saw the value in what we were saying," says Smita.

Now, Itihaas conducts study tours for over 35,000 children from 6 to 17 years of age every year. Nearly 110 schools in the National Capital Region work with it. Schools pay Itihaas Rs 100 to Rs 150 per student for a walk. "We did no selling. I am not good at marketing. So I didn't market. But we have over 30,000 ambassadors for Itihaas now. Our walks market themselves," she says simply.