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An Indian American's tryst with deprived school children

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New York -- After making a fortune on Wall Street, Indian American Abraham George decided it was time to do something for the country of his origin -- he set up an elite boarding school for poor children. George's work was highlighted in an hour-long documentary titled "Thomas L. Friedman Reporting: The Other Side of Outsourcing" and premiered on Discovery Channel Thursday night. The show, hosted by Pulitzer Prize winner Friedman, was part of his reportage from India on outsourcing. It is produced by New York Times Television and directed by Kenneth Levis. Indian American Dina Hossain is the co-producer. Friedman takes viewers to India's southern city of Bangalore that has become the hub of computer software production and maintenance and a major business process outsourcing (BPO) centre. He looks at how a "perfect storm" of culture, government and economics came together to make India the destination for thousands of knowledge-based jobs.

In Bangalore, an entry-level phone bank worker makes about Rs.11,290 (\$250) a month, making it less expensive for a US company to route a customer service call halfway around the world than to pay an American worker to pick up that phone. Friedman goes to an Indian call centre to see how they recruit and hire their workers. Employees are trained to speak with American accents and catchphrases. Many even choose an Anglicised name for themselves to use while on the phone with customers. Friedman also visits lesser-known operations that are being outsourced, such as high-tech animation and video game production companies. And that is when the viewers get to witness George's school. The film will again feature on Discovery Spotlight, the network's series of current affairs programming, Monday at 9 p.m. Friedman has already written on George's efforts in setting up the school for poor children in the capital of India's southern state of Karnataka. The article, "Making India Shine", appeared Wednesday in the New York Times with Friedman writing about George's Shanti Bhavan project, located an hour away from Bangalore. Shanti Bhavan, with 160 students, provides facilities at par with India's prestigious Doon School, but the children in Bangalore are from families whose total household income would be less than Rs.9,000 (\$200) a year. The philanthropist is also working on a project to bring quality medical care to villages where no city doctor wants to go. In every case, he uses state-of-the-art technology. After making his fortune on Wall Street, George became a philanthropist, splitting his time between his New Jersey home and south India. Instead of just talking about helping his homeland like most non-resident Indians, he is actually doing it. Working with the Columbia Journalism School, he has also set up the Indian Institute of Journalism and New Media in Bangalore. In his article, Friedman recalls asking some eight-year-old children in Shanti Bhavan what they wanted to be. He wrote: "Their answers were: 'an astronaut', 'a doctor', 'a paediatrician', 'a poetess', 'physics and chemistry', 'a scientist and an astronaut', 'a surgeon', 'a detective', 'an author'. Looking at these kids, George said, 'They are the ones

who have to do well for India to succeed.' "And that brings us to the lesson of India's election: the broad globalisation strategy that India opted for in the early 1990's has succeeded in unlocking the country's incredible brainpower and stimulating sustained growth, which is the best antipoverty program." Published by HT Media Ltd. with permission from IANS