READ INDIA CAMPAIGN

Learning to read is the first and most essential step for education. Without being able to read a child cannot progress further in any school or educational program. In India, there are approximately 250 million children in the 6-14 age group. Of these 59 million are still out of school. Reading is a problem even among school-going children. Available estimates indicate that of the children who are in school only 25 to 30% can read simple text fluently.

Pratham’s Read India Campaign

Is an accelerated reading program possible? Can this ‘catch-up’ be done in a short period of time on a large scale? Can this be accomplished in India given the conditions in school and the low levels of literacy at home for first generation learners?

The technique:
Since January 2003, Pratham has innovated and tested an accelerated reading technique that combines several activities to build reading skills. The daily activities include pointing to words and reading aloud, using the phonetic (“barakhadi”) chart in a variety of ways, written and oral word games and daily writing tasks. In Pratham programs across the country, between January and June 2003, almost 150,000 children between the ages of 6 and 14 have participated in this reading experiment. In most cases, the “accelerated reading program” has been conducted for short periods from three weeks to two months with remarkable results.

The results:
Since January 2003, close to 300,000 children have participated in ReadIndia initiatives in Pratham programs across the country. (See the attached tables for samples of how Pratham’s efforts have helped children to read.)

The catalytic effect:
In Maharashtra, this accelerated reading technique was piloted by the state government in government schools in two rural blocks in Feb-April 2003. The results were so encouraging that the government has decided to use it state-wide. Their objective is to ensure that by the end of this year, every one of the 4 million children in school will be reading well. There have been encouraging efforts in several other states. Increasing numbers of non-government agencies working in the field of education are beginning to use this accelerated reading method across the country. Reading has become an important item on the national educational agenda.

The next steps:
If suddenly a very large numbers of children learning to read, what happens next? There are at least three important elements of the next step that we can envisage right now:
  - Children must learn to read at higher levels and learn to write well.
  - Children must have a books to read so that they can read to learn.
  - Children must have access to books on an on-going and continuous basis.
I. Innovations in teaching-learning techniques: Reading, writing and maths: 
After learning to read, the obvious next step is reading to learn. In Pratham programs across the country, already work has started on getting children to read at a higher level, encouraging oral discussion and initiating the ability to write on one’s own. Simultaneously, there is thrust on improving basic arithmetic skills.

II. Books: 
Despite the size of India’s child population, very few Indian regional languages have more than a thousand titles of children’s books currently available. As a natural extension of the Read India campaign, Pratham Books has been launched. The objective of Read India Books is to promote in a big way the creation and distribution of quality books at an affordable price so that Indian children will be able to read and access easily lots of good books no matter where they live, no matter what language they speak. By June 2004, 75 new titles should be ready for printing.

III. Libraries: 
Apart from the direct educational programs run by Pratham initiatives across the country, a network of community children’s libraries is being set up. These are based in the localities where children live. Books are available through these libraries and a variety of reading and writing activities and events are conducted through the year under the umbrella of the library. In 2003-2004 there were 1600 Pratham libraries. This number is likely to rise to 3000 in 2004-2005.

**Mahatma Gandhi walked 300 km for 23 days in 1930 and picked up salt¹. Hundreds of thousands followed him, and the history of India was changed. Today, you do not have to walk 300 km. You do not pick up salt. Pick up a book, and read it with a few children for 23 days. Hundreds of thousands will join you, The history of India will be changed, once again.**

¹ The “salt satyagraha” the civil disobedience protest against the salt tax of the British Empire is one of the biggest landmarks in the Indian independence movement.