

Learning to teach

Pratham's path-breaking method of teaching children to read and write is making a positive difference in the lives of many children

by Dr Madhav Chavan

Savita is an eight-year-old girl who lives in a village called Pulachi Wadi ('hamlet at the bridge') in Mokhada *tehsil* of Thane district, one of the more backward regions in India. On 18 February 2003, Savita, together with many of her friends, was put in front of a camera and asked to read a simple paragraph in bold font. She tilted her head sideways and attempted to read. An incomprehensible string of syllables came out hesitantly...slowly...inaudibly... Savita was at the end of grade III and her school curriculum demanded learning of grammar, multiplication, division, environment sciences, and even English. But little Savita could not read.

After 45 days, on 3 April 2003, the camera crew went back to Pulachi Wadi. This time Savita sat up straight and confident, held the paper with three unfamiliar sentences, again written in bold letters. She read in a clear voice, "My mother gave me a snack. Raju and I took the snack and went to school. Raju is my friend". Then she smiled.

Savita's teacher had been helping her to 'learn to read' using a new technique introduced by Pratham. Savita was not alone. The magic of the new technique touched nearly 20,000 other children in Mokhada and Igatpuri *tehsils* of Thane and Nasik districts between 15 February and 30 March 2003, at the very end of the school year. Of these children, 50 per cent could not read when the experiment began. At the end of it, more than 88 per cent were reading simple texts fluently. This year they will continue with 'reading to learn' to improve their comprehension and writing skills so that they understand what is in their school textbooks. They will learn to express themselves in writing.

What happened in those forty-five days? Had that magic not happened, what chance would Savita have of completing her elementary education? The second question first.

The situation of Mokhada and Igatpuri is not unique, when it comes to lack of learning in schools. Pratham surveys show that in the slums of Mumbai, nearly 35 per cent

children in the six to 14 age group cannot read, leave alone write. In the rest of the districts of Maharashtra, the situation is not too different from these two *tehsils*. It would be reasonably correct to say that, across India, about 50 per cent or more children in grades II to V in government schools cannot read. In the north, where primary education has been deregulated, the children in the shanty private schools do not do much better.

The number is quite shocking. Imagine, out of about 200 million children in the six to 14 age group, nearly 100 million cannot read! At the same time, it is a very interesting number. Government statistics tell us that 40 per cent of the children enrolled in grade I (and it is claimed that 96 per cent do enroll!) will drop out of school before completing grade V. Over 50 per cent will not make it beyond grade VII and about 66 per cent will not cross grade X.

If 50 per cent of enrolled children cannot read by the time they are in grade IV, how can they continue to be in school? The correlation between not being able to read and dropping out is clear and simple. The daily humiliation in class leaves these children no option but to leave school. While there are other reasons that contribute to the process of dropping out, we at Pratham believe that not learning in

• school is a primary factor leading to a chain reaction and triggering the other links associated with social and economic backwardness. These children are not dropouts, but in fact, push-outs.

Conventional wisdom has it that millions like Savita will dropout. Our systems are planned around the assumption of a significant dropout rate. The number of schools in India catering to different levels present sufficient evidence of this:

Primary schools	664,041
Upper Primary	219,626
High School+	133,492

Improving quality of learning in government schools is an important strategy in putting pressure on a lethargic, demoralised and apathetic system. Individually, very few persons in the system are 'bad'. It is



The write thing: 'Out of 200 m children, 100 m cannot read'

the system itself that distorts the individual's perspective of things. The system has been teaching that Savita's learning is not important, that Savita will not make it past grade IV or V anyway, that it is enough if she can write a few words or just her own name.

The experiment in Mokhada and Igatpuri did two things. The schoolteachers who are a key part of the system proved to themselves that they could teach Savita and others like her to read in a short span. Secondly, they proved that Savita can learn to read quickly and her life need not be wasted as an 'illiterate'. As millions more learn to read and express the desire to continue to go to school, there would need to be a substantial investment in school infrastructure to meet the demand.

So why did Savita not learn all these years? And what made her learn so quickly?

The technique: understanding the roots of the problem

It is a common observation in educated homes that children who are two to three years old sit down with books (mostly held the right way) and pretend to read. Grown-ups read out stories to them and this combined with their learning in pre-school or school leads to their reading skills. The combination of reading of stories and the learning of alphabets and vowel signs and their use is important.

Consider Savita and millions like her whose parents are poorly educated and whose homes do not have a reading-writing culture. They never played 'pretend to read', no one read out to them and asked them to read. In school, they were immediately subjected to writing alphabets on the slate. Clearly, Savita and other children like her did not make the connection between thinking, speaking, and reading. The meaningless learning of alphabets had nothing to do with the joy of reading and understanding what is written.

When children, seven and above, are asked to read, they do so with varying degrees of fluency. A child who can read words does so by slowly piecing together the consonants and the vowel signs and then saying the word aloud. In the bargain, the fact that the word is a part of a sentence is completely lost. Those who can read simple sentences have to grow in confidence to read more difficult words in sentences and understand complex sentences. Those who know only the alphabets have no clue that a collection of

pictures representing sounds actually makes a word with some meaning. Those who can read nothing do not know that a certain picture or a collection of pictures stands for sounds and meaning.

The Pratham technique is based on two main and some supportive activities. All carried out from the very first day of the class and the teacher is asked not to TEACH but to observe, to ASK but not answer, and ENCOURAGE not discourage, to FACILITATE but not help.



Class act: Pratham's unique methodology has caught the imagination of the young ones

The first activity is reading. The teacher hands out one copy each of a simple paragraph in bold font. She reads the sentences slowly with her finger following under each word in a manner that all children can see where the finger is while they listen to

the sound of words. They discuss what is read so that there is some recollection of the words. Now she asks, "Who wants to read like me?" Immediately all hands go up. Even those with no knowledge of alphabets would like to read. They 'pretend' to read. The fingers are all over the place, the words do not come in the correct sequence. Sentences are all wrong, but they are dead serious about 'reading'. This activity continues with more and more simple paragraphs. Children who can read words move very rapidly and attempt to read on their own. The alphabet and 'nothing' category children continue to play pretend and get better and better at it. No one stumbles. They learn to read sentences and do not halt at every letter or every word.

The second activity is with the 'barahkhadV' chart. Professor Jalaluddin, an internationally renowned literacy expert, has worked with the chart as a means of coding and decoding syllables. The individual forms of the consonants represent sounds.

Since inception the goal of the Pratham team has been to ensure that "every child is in school and is learning well". Over a nine-year period, Pratham has reached out to a million children.

An accelerated learning method, in which an unlettered child starts reading and computing basic mathematics in three weeks, has been in use since late 2002 and has taught over 160,000 children since then to become literate.



The child is familiarised with the way the chart is organised by reciting ka, ka, ki, kee, etc. and asked to do the same for other consonants. Exploration of more and more consonants begins. The children are then asked to say any word, find it in the *barakhadi* like finding pieces of a puzzle, and then copy the letter shapes to code the sound into a word. The activity becomes immediately interesting. Homework is to say more words or sentences and find them in the chart. Homework and group work become a lot of fun.

The supporting activities are to say and find rhyming words, and then to say anything and write anything with the help of the chart. Children who do not know alphabets learn with the help of flashcards and simple games, in groups. Different children learn different alphabets and together they learn many alphabets at a time.

If the teacher sticks to not 'helping' or being overeager to correct mistakes, the children start taking initiative. They correct each other's mistakes, argue, and progress.

Much the same way that children learn games on the playground. It is this initiative that leads to rapid learning. One of the Pratham teachers observed that the children seemed to 'catch it' out of thin air. Suddenly, one day, the child is reading. In fact, unless the teacher observes carefully, she does not even realise that the child has progressed to the paragraph reading stage.

In Jaipur we have observed that nine to ten-year-olds learn to read from nothing in about two weeks! In mass scale programmes where each teacher and each class cannot be monitored carefully, the children still learn in about four to six weeks.

The technique is very simple. If you read the above paragraphs carefully, you do not need training. You can get started! This simplicity makes transfer of the know-how much simpler and less prone to distortions, although they do happen with every ladder of transfer. The effect, even after distortions, is visible in a very short time because the children learn. Simplicity and quick, visible results add to the magic.

Impact of the technique

The success of the technique in the hands of the much-maligned government schoolteachers in two *tehsils* has resulted in the technique being tried out in other districts of Maharashtra. It is spreading very fast. The fact that children learn to read is, perhaps, enough of a success. But, more importantly, we find teachers now asking for more such simple and productive tools to alter the learning scenario. We are now transferring the know-how to teach basic arithmetic operations and moving to the 'reading to learn' part where higher levels of comprehension and writing are emphasised.

In the process, teachers are learning an important cultural lesson of allowing children to learn. This is the first step of making strides towards child-centric learning. The Education Department organises many training programmes. But the training is never linked with predictable results. Such training is rarely effective. On the other hand, we find that having achieved a predictable goal, teachers are now eager to try new ways, and are in a frame of mind to change many things to achieve concrete results in reading writing and arithmetic. We expect greater receptiveness with every success.

A system that was apathetic and lethargic seems to be moving. Individuals in this system have begun to move. Insertion of a technique has caused this change. It is almost parallel to the impact of technology on human society. It changes the way people think.

The possibilities

Pratham has tested the 'reading programme' in their classes, in eight different states, with over 170,000 children. There is a growing predictability of success. Other non-government organisations and school systems outside Maharashtra, in Assam and Bihar have tried it. It seems immensely possible that the technique will be transferred to many more State-school systems, and along with it a cultural shift will happen in many regions. Of course, the years of resistance to change will not go away overnight, but the gradual seepage of success can break the apparently impregnable rock.

This shift from 'nothing can change' to 'things can be made better' can make governmental efforts productive on all fronts. The key to increased participation from parents also lies in visible changes in the way the school works.

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan launched by the government of India is not yet an *abhiyan*, a movement. Plans have been prepared at district levels and funds have been sanctioned. If the plans have to deliver expected results, a new spirit, a new environment will have to be created. Typically, environment building is equated with putting up posters and taking out marches and such other activities. Instead, why not show how quickly a change can be brought about in the children's learning? This can be done at every district level and it will pay dividends.

We believe that little Savita's learning has the power to appeal to the positive energies of individuals. They can, in turn, activate the strongly positive elements in the government to ensure that real universal elementary education can be achieved by 2010, as the government has declared. Savita has done her bit by learning to read. Now the rest of us have to do our bit.

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