Pratham - preparing the very young

*'Every child in school, every child learning, every child attending/
is Pratham's vision, and it tries to realise this by preparing children in* balwadis
for higher education

by Farida Lambay

In the seventies, Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work took an initiative to work with municipal schools in Mumbai. It was the first time a partnership of this kind had been forged between an educational institution and the municipal corporation. We wanted to demonstrate how social services help for the education of the marginalised. I joined the initiative in the role of a social worker. After six years of demonstration, the municipal corporation decided to institutionalise this relationship. Today, social workers are part of the corporation. Mumbai is the only city in the country where such a policy has been adopted.

Although Pratham was set up only in 1994, this collaboration built the foundation on which the organisation stands. It was clear that dropout, wastage and stagnation in education are not problems of the poor, but that of the system. The solution is not by providing education alone; you have to provide the whole package of support systems, including nutrition, uniform, books and so on. This understanding has now been translated into policies at the BMC (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation).

Pratham came about as a result of a study commissioned by the UNICEF and conducted by Nirmala Niketan in Mumbai. The study found that 200,000 children were out of school, 23 per cent could not read or write, ten per cent were 'regularly irregular' and 18 per cent dropped out from the fourth or seventh standards. It also established that parents wanted their children to study and that they valued education. The education system, however, was not adequately supportive.

The study made it clear that in order to make a significant difference we cannot work as individual organisations in the 'small is beautiful' mode; we will have to go large scale. However, we still wanted to work outside the system and not put the onus on the BMC alone, but on citizens as well.

Dr Madhav Chauhan (now Programme Director of Pratham), was part of the literacy movement, a movement which held that literacy is the government's responsibility, but citizens should be working on it because it is not the problem of the illiterate. The way we see it is that the BMC has to be accountable to its citizens. Citizens should be able to work together with the BMC, and not antagonise it.

Thus, Pratham was born in Mumbai in 1994, committed to the cause of universalisation of primary education. Although it was technically set up as a non-government organisation (NGO), it is really a platform that brings together the local self-government, the corporate sector and the voluntary sector. Pratham was launched with the municipal commissioner as the ex-officio vice chairperson of the trust. The chairperson has always been the head of an industry — earlier it was SP Godrej, chairperson of Godrej Group of Companies and now it is N Vaghul, chairperson of the Board of ICICI Limited.

Having set up Pratham, the objective was to make citizens participate at all levels. We looked at the efficiency of the system in Mumbai where Rs 400 crores is spent on education i.e. Rs 4,083 per child. Mumbai has some of the best-trained teachers; 86 per cent of the education budget went towards teachers' salary. This is all public money and, therefore, the concern for universalisation of education is not the monopoly of the government or NGOs but of citizens.

When we found that 85 per cent of Mumbai's children in municipal schools went without attending pre-school, we decided that the work needs to be taken up at a mass scale. *Balwadis* (pre-schools) were set up in 23 wards and all slums. Adolescent girls were trained to start *balwadis;* in the process they gained freedom and our trust. They

Programmes at Pratham

• The *Balwadi* programme for pre-school education and basic health intervention to children in the age-group of three to four years.

• The *Balsakhi* programme to help children of the second standard in municipal schools who are bordering on illiteracy.

• The Bridge Course to impart literacy-numeracy skills to children who have never been to school or dropped out.

• The Outreach Programme provides educational opportunities to child labourers, street children, pavement-dwellers and children in conflict with the law.

• Computer Assisted Learning aims at familiarising municipal primary school children with computers and educational games in regional languages.

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feel immensely empowered. The community has realised that pre-school is essential for better performance, attention, enrolment and retention in primary schools. The community has grown to see their education as their own problem.

To its credit, Pratham has been able to reach out to citizens at every level — the elite, people living in slums and the middle class. It is steered by the belief that each of these groups of citizens lack opportunities for collaboration and action. The organisation has channelled the energy and resources of the corporate sector, students, communities and the municipal corporation to facilitate an interaction between them. What guides the collaboration is the principle that nobody is in the driver's seat; each one is playing the role of a catalyst along with the other.

As individuals, we play very important roles. We help to get institutions involved. I have got Nirmala Niketan involved. Similarly, people in HDFC, ICICI, etc. have got institutional commitment to the cause. Once communities have the back-up of multinationals, they know that somebody is supporting them and they do not mind taking risks. Another group playing a major role is the NGO network.

In terms of advocacy, we have done it through demonstration effect. The Sarva Shikshan Abhiyan of the State is modelled on the Pratham pattern. It incorporates a community-based monitoring system. The Pratham model is cheap, low-cost and replicable; it uses existing resources - "your resource, our mechanism". By 2002, the organisation has spread to 21 cities, (ten of which are in Maharashtra). Last year, it included the earthquake-affected areas of Kutch and Rajkot in the network. The Pratham model works through a relationship of trust. Barring a couple of cities, no MoU has been drawn up between the different players. Over 30,000 out-of-school children have been brought into schools through its efforts.

Pratham is not there to stay; it is not an asset-building organisation. It advocates time-bound governance. In our society, education is the greatest divider. Pratham feels it should be an equaliser. Ultimately, the image of municipal schools will have to change. Today, the children of staff of municipal schools do not study there.

As told to Rukmini Datta

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A bit about *balwadis*

Sewri Cross Road Municipal School, F-South ward, Mumbai bears a deserted look because the school is closed for the day. Two classrooms on the ground floor, however, are bubbling with action. About 40 children, between three to five years of age, are attending *balwadi* run with assistance from Pratham. The posters on the walls have sketches of animals and birds and their description in Urdu. Pathan Rubina, their 22-year-old teacher, is explaining the concept of solubility by adding salt and mud to two glasses of water. The children watch the experiment and repeat the inference after their teacher, *"Mitti pani mein gair-halshuda hai."* (Mud is insoluble in water.) Says Rubina, "Some parents want to admit their children to English medium schools, so we teach them numeracy in English, too." From 1998 to 2000, Rubina was a *balsakhi* with the children of the second, third and fourth standards of Sewri Cross Road Municipal School. When her friend, who ran the *balwadi,* married and left, Rubina took over.

Sheikh Ghausia, in the next classroom, is filling in for her sister who is not well. "My sister studied till the tenth standard. She wanted to study further but she was not permitted to by our family" Their brother went home one day and said that Pratham had announced in his school that it was looking for girls educated till the tenth standard, to run *balwadis*. Her sister persuaded the elders at home to let her work as a *balwadi* in-charge. 'They relented because she had studied in this school and they were familiar with it."

A typical day in the *balwadi* is of two-and-a-half hours, and comprises prayers, recitation of poems, familiarity with numbers and colours, writing on the slate, story-telling and 'tiffin-time'. The idea is to prepare the child for the first standard in a regular primary school. "I see children in my locality who do not attend pre-school and the difference is perceptible. They find it difficult to mix with other children in school. How is a child, who has not attended pre-school, supposed to know to even hold a pencil?"

Sangeeta Lokhande is responsible for overseeing the functioning of 46 *balwadh* in four municipal wards of Mumbai. "Some *balwadh* need more regular visits than others. The monetary support to the teachers vary depending on how much the children can pay as fees which is collected entirely by the teacher." Initially, Pratham had fixed an upper limit of Rs 20 per child per month. Now, it has been left open because, "if parents were willing to pay more for the service, why shouldn't the teachers benefit?" Pratham provides all teaching material and training inputs are provided to the teachers, free of cost. Teachers, who charge Rs 20 or less, are paid a stipend of Rs 250 by Pratham. They also compensate for children who do not pay their fees (at the rate of Rs 20).

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