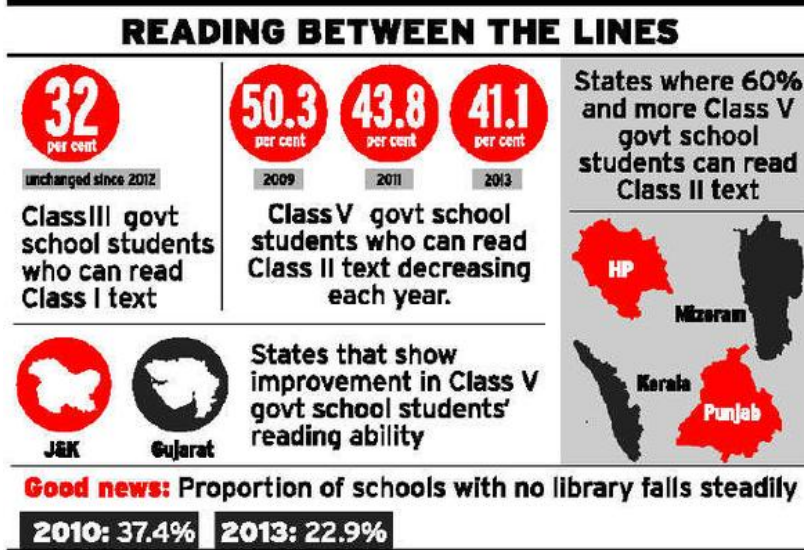


Turning the page

MALA KUMAR



The latest ASER report finds once more that our government schools don't necessarily produce students who can read. That's why the work of volunteers, the reading warriors as MALA KUMAR calls them, becomes vital.

Satyavathi studies in Class V in a government school in Hoskote, Karnataka. She was reading an entire page of text, rocking on her feet as she read. At the end, she stopped and looked at me, and when I smiled, she let out a happy sigh of relief. Like her classmates, for Satyavathi reading is not about comprehension; it's about being able to string alphabets together and come out with sounds. Satyavathi is smart and eager, the best in her class. Raju, a year older, cannot read at all. Will these children ever learn to really read?

According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2013 released last month, the proportion of all children nationally in Class V who can read a Class II level text remains virtually the same since 2012: 47 per cent.

Among Class V children in government schools, this percentage has decreased to 41.1 per cent.

The household-based annual education survey covers six lakh children in the age group 3-16 across 550 districts, about 16,000 villages, and 3.3 lakh households. Despite the dismal figures it throws up, there is some hope still. It comes not so much from the formal learning centres as from the work of volunteers and organisations around the country that are doing stellar work to promote reading among rural children.

Learning to read is not an instinctive act like learning to talk, run, or play. But there is no doubt that the ability to read is one of the most important skills children need for their development. As an editor with Pratham Books that publishes accessible books for children, I am troubled by this question: Why are children, especially in rural schools, not reading?

"Are you asking about reading skills, or children's inclination to read?" asks Neha Pradhan Arora, Head of Programmes at Swachha, which runs Pagdandi, a volunteer-driven alternative educational space for children of resettlement and slum colonies in Delhi. Since 2009, it has reached hundreds of children in Jagdamba Camp. "The ability to read depends upon learning and teaching, but reading for pleasure depends on access to books. That's the reason we started Kitabghar. Reading is first a skill, then becomes a joy, and only after that can it empower the child."

Pagdandi runs monthly reading days, and conducts periodical reading-related events. Like Pagdandi, there are hundreds of organisations and individuals who have made it their mission to promote reading for pleasure among children. "Children anywhere will read if they are introduced to the act of reading in the right environment," says Sathyanarayanan Mundayoor, fondly known as Uncle Moosa. This extraordinary crusader has been instrumental in setting up 13 libraries, called Bamboosa Libraries, in the villages of Arunachal Pradesh through the Lohit Youth Libraries programme.

“In Arunachal Pradesh, even the government finds it difficult because of connectivity and terrain. The only hope for promoting reading is the school system. But when these schools lack even basic facilities, having a library is not easy. After coming under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, officials are unable to pay attention to teacher training and other aspects of school governance. Add to this the fact that reading is taught only as a means to teach other subjects,” says Mundayoor, who has been working in Arunachal Pradesh for over three decades. “Volunteers, mostly from tribal villages, are eager to work with reading-deprived children. Books are accessible and kept in open cupboards. Unlike the top-down approach of school librarians, where they decide what and when a child should read, here the volunteers encourage children to read whatever they choose. Volunteers return to their own villages and start similar reading rooms.”

That children love stories is universal. “Children need to be surrounded by books. When reading for pleasure is not part of the culture, there is no push to read. Children are encouraged only to read textbooks and moralistic stories. Our children need books that are colourful, exciting and in languages they can read. They need books that have humour. The only way children will learn to read is if they have books to touch and see and read,” says Suzanne Singh, chairperson, Pratham Books.

At the Kalkeri Sangeet Vidyalaya in Dharwad, music is in the air as students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds learn to play the sitar, tabla, or bansuri or learn vocal Hindustani music. They are reading the notations and lyrics in their notebooks. Says Barbara Schmid, a social welfare manager who moved from Germany to Kalkeri six years ago, “Young children are very curious. Even if they are unable to read, they are eager to read, and this makes them quick learners. The older children who have come late to our school find it difficult. The key to inculcate the habit of reading for pleasure is to provide the atmosphere as early in life as possible.”

Conventional teaching follows a slow progression — from alphabet to word to simple sentences and finally to paragraphs. The Accelerated Reading Programme developed by Akshara Foundation, a Karnataka-based non-profit, reverses this process. Their technique starts with ‘reading’ from the first day. Children imagine and wonder, trying to make sense of what they see. They stumble, ‘read’, guess at words, try and understand its meaning, and eventually learn to read.

“When children are unable to decode text, or are not in places where reading is a habit, one can’t expect them to be drawn to books; they see it as a dead piece of text,” points out Sujatha Noronha, who started Bookworm in Goa. Bookworm has been taking storytelling and books to children in some of the poorest socio-economic groups in Goa. “We have to somehow infuse some magic to draw children to read,” she says.

To mark International Literacy Day in September 2013, Pratham Books invited volunteers to spread the joy of reading. We expected 100 volunteers; we got more than 600, who conducted over 1000 book-reading and storytelling sessions in 25 languages across India. That is a small sprinkling of magic dust, but given the serious issue of children not being able to read in India, we need many more warriors like Uncle Moosa.

THE READING WARRIORS

Pagdandi: Organises reading days and reading events for slum children in Delhi.

Uncle Moosa: Extraordinary crusader who has helped set up 13 Bamboosa Libraries in villages of Arunachal Pradesh.

Akshara Foundation: Runs an Accelerated Reading Programme in Karnataka that helps children start ‘reading’ from Day 1.

Bookworm: Takes storytelling camps and books to children in some of the poorest socio-economic groups of Goa.

Pratham Books: Has printed over 8.5 million books and over 10 million story cards in English and 10 other Indian languages.

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