

2006

Hope Amidst Despair

Pratham New Delhi

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Pratham—the word means “primary”—and an organization by this name aims to eliminate illiteracy and provide universal primary education in India. This goal itself is beyond daunting. Approximately 137 million Indian children—almost half the total population of the United States—are illiterate. Pratham aims to put all these children into school. Since Madhav Chavan founded the organization in 1994 in a slum in Mumbai, Pratham has served over one million children. It has become one of India’s largest educational non-government organizations (NGOs).

Pratham has achieved this impressive one million mark largely through its unusual structure. So that children see education as a familiarity rather than an imposition, Pratham draws its teachers from the community. These community members will also have greater success convincing reluctant parents to send their children to school than outsiders will. Pratham thus aims to create a uniquely grassroots movement where each community works to improve itself and where the desire to gain education comes from within.

I had attended a few Pratham fundraisers in the US where every pamphlet I read quoted impressive statistics, I had heard all the speeches extolling Pratham’s incredible work, I had even met Pratham’s founder—but it still seemed impossible to me. How could Pratham have even begun to dent this massive wall of illiteracy? In the summer of 2006, I decided to find out.

I resolved to spend most of my usual biennial trip to India working with Pratham’s New Delhi branch. During my journey, I would not only try to understand how the organization worked, but to assist Pratham meet its incredible goal. At first, I felt uncomfortable, for I had never really spent time in a slum before. I had known sturdy air-conditioned houses, not small huts with crumbling brick exteriors and ripped plastic as roofs. I had drunk clean water and never truly seen the mosquito-infested murky pools of water that periodically punctuated an otherwise barren landscape. I had grown used to a very different sort of India, one in which I drove in a car, visited five-star hotels, and had food served by servants. In this other India, only the most fortunate drive on small scooters, five-star hotels remain meaningless and remote monoliths for everyone, and citizens struggle to feed themselves. In some areas, even water, that vital benefactor of life, remains painfully scarce. Diseases such as malaria, typhoid, and tuberculosis ravage all these areas and sometimes annihilate entire families. Most families do menial jobs. Adults receive less than twenty-five cents per day to feed families as large as eleven, so many parents force their children to work—some to shine shoes, others to sell wares to apathetic car drivers waiting at intersections, and yet others simply to beg. And so education plays a minimal, a most expendable, role to many of India’s poor.

But as I observed some of Pratham’s programs—one for working children, another at a daycare, another for preschoolers—and as I interviewed grateful and now literate children and their loving and approving parents, I started to perceive the excitement and hope that Pratham had injected into these communities. For one month, I experienced this hope amidst despair first-hand. I would be remiss not to share it:

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Opposite the Radhu Cinema, and perhaps 100 meters ahead, stands an unmarked concrete building almost indistinguishable from those around it. On the third floor, however, lies the headquarters of Pratham Delhi, an uncharacteristically distinguished organization that spearheads one of the largest efforts to eliminate illiteracy and provide universal primary education in India.

Furnished with maps of districts of Delhi and large posters bearing Pratham’s slogan—Every Child in School and Learning Well—the office itself seemed thoroughly focused on its daunting goal. Rekha, one of the social workers at the organization, introduced Pratham’s basic structure of *balwadis* and *balsakhis* and of hiring local teachers so that education became a familiarity rather than an imposition. She noted that Pratham needed a satisfactory records system to determine how it could improve its methods in order to have a long-term effect on its children. That venture—begun in the district of South Shahdara—of constructing a complete community profile, interviewing former Pratham students, and gathering familial attitudes towards education, will prove essential to

the organization's growth, not only because it will allow for an evaluation of its own methods, but because it will also provide a concrete display of Pratham's progress.

This progress can perhaps be best felt in the government schools run by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD). A low gate serves as the entrance to a courtyard surrounded by a bare concrete hallway that enters into a number of large but dark classrooms. Blackboards below long fluorescent lights, the only source of artificial light in each room, serve as the focus for the forty or fifty students in each class. Blue-uniformed students typically sit in pairs on wooden benches attached to small desks, but a shortage of materials sometimes forces three students to squeeze into a space made for two. Furthermore, students need to move desks from room to room as class sessions change, which marks a more serious insufficiency. This school's principal urged Tasleem Bano, the head of the Pratham office in South Shahdara, to look at the food that he fed his students, which can only mean that the food was quite good. Unfortunately, the intense interest that the principal betrayed when displaying his food shows that the food that some other MCD schools provide may be sadly inadequate.

Despite these shortcomings, students in this school seemed very alert and intelligent. When visitors entered one classroom, the students chorused in a cheerful "Namaste" and gave the visitors unconditional respect and attention. Most students were eager to display what they had learned, in contrast to the usual initial taciturnity and shyness of some students elsewhere. Students enjoyed performing a dance and simulating rainfall with their hands, both activities that their teacher had introduced to them, which suggests that this teacher led a stimulating and enjoyable class. The class, however, consisted wholly of boys. Whether this disparity results from segregation within the school or from parental hesitance to send girls to school, the complete male dominance in this class was particularly shocking. Although this class was male dominated, a school for part-time students who hold domestic jobs was almost entirely female. This class took place in a smaller room, one with a small wooden entryway and but a single bulb to light the room. Some sunlight did filter through the recessed entry, but much of the room remained in unfortunate darkness. Students sat in a small circle on mats, but had little room to themselves, for the room failed to comfortably accommodate the twelve or thirteen people in this class. Nonetheless, students listened to a story read by the teacher and answered questions that she posed. Some students seemed unsure of what the teacher was asking and simply regurgitated succinctly the answers of others when their turns came, but other students seemed to grasp the passage quite easily. As some students in this class had never attended school and as all the students already held jobs, however, such uncertainty is expected.

To help banish some of this uncertainty, Pratham created a library, both for in-school and out-of-school children. Consisting of several heavy black bags packed with books, its mobile library seems equipped with enough books to satisfy many children. One of its stationary libraries is set up in a government dispensary. Three staggered stacks of books lie on the harsh concrete floor, while a string between a tree and a large shaded platform supports a number of other books by their spines. Bounded on three sides by polished walls and on the third by a high black gate, the library provides a spot of relative peace and offers children relief from the surrounding racket. Despite trees behind the wall opposite the narrow street, the library has little protection from the sun, which visibly caused some children discomfort. Children may enter and exit as they please, and this freedom is essential in sparking interest in literature. Children sat in two circles, again on mats, again cramped. Al-



Students at a library in South Shahdara read a book about an emperor's anger with his queen

though the dispensary can hold many children, the library's perhaps unanticipated popularity means that additional children must sit on the cement floor. In one circle, children seemed wholly immersed in reading, a trait visible just from their intense glares and intent faces. In the other, a teacher held a successful class similar to the one for working children. One librarian, however, seemed brusque in her manner and thrust random books at some children and unnecessarily prodded children who took even a short break from reading. Overall, the library still did a fine job of encouraging children to read.



Numerous books hang from strings along the walls of the library

Teachers themselves were overall of good quality. Most seemed interested and dedicated, though many noted frustrations over poor attendance and parental attitudes. Most commonly, teachers complained about the lack of support from parents, who either saw education unnecessary for their children's careers or perhaps justifiably valued the short-term gains from

paying work over the long-term gains from non-paying education. Some Pratham officials have also reported that many parents have approached them and sometimes blatantly told them to start teaching English.

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In order to help meet the requests of many of Pratham's children and their parents, the organization set up an experimental English program in South Shahdara. Although Pratham has already created a preliminary English curriculum, the organization felt that first improving the English of the teachers would ultimately allow for English instruction to reach more children. Since many teachers already knew some basic English words, Pratham decided that helping the teachers speak confidently was their most immediate need. As a way to help them overcome their hesitance, teachers received copies of English plays that had been translated from familiar Hindi children's books. Teachers could now match their parts in the play with the corresponding lines in the book, thereby strengthening their vocabularies, and would learn to project, improve their diction, and build confidence as they acted.

Children in a Pratham school built in collaboration with the Delhi Center for Children's Welfare (DCCW) eagerly awaited their own English lessons. After receiving a large plot of land from the DCCW, Pratham helped the Center construct buildings on the site. Upon entry to the walled site through a small black gate, a large one-roomed building shields many small children from the sun. Two big open doors on either side of the building admit enough sunlight to preclude the use of artificial light. Children in this DCCW daycare had plenty of room in which to move about and the building seemed of a comfortable temperature. Surrounding the pale yellow building



Students at Pratham's school for working children at the DCCW perform a play about kings and eagles

lies a large expanse of compact dirt, with a few spurts of grass and a number of bushes in one corner the only remnants of a once expansive field of greenery. Recultivating and at least minimally maintaining the lawn would give children at the DCCW a much nicer environment in which to spend the day. Children did, however, enjoy playing on the few unbroken swings and the tired slides that lay scattered around the plot.

Towards the back of the plot stands a smaller two-roomed building that houses one of Pratham's schools for working children. In both rooms, yellow walls hold up a blue ceiling, the patches on which give the impression of looking into a late afternoon pale blue sky dotted with small, harmless clouds. A fluorescent light hangs on one wall, but enough sunlight falls through the door and the windows that it remains off. Twenty children sitting in a large circle fit easily into one room. One particular session mixed some working children with many in-school children. Most children seemed content and glad to attend this Pratham program. One student noted that he found his school's method of teaching boring, but commended the Pratham program for coupling knowledge with enjoyment. Some children revealed their jobs, most as poorly paid manual workers, and thanked the program for giving them the opportunity to learn. These children were visibly agitating their teacher through their inattentiveness during their own performance of an Indian story, but the teacher remained relatively calm and the students successfully completed their play. This class proved the most gregarious so far, and many gladly volunteered to recite a poem or sing a song. Many children decided to sing and dance to a popular song from the Indian movie *Kaal*. This impressive performance received tumults of applause from both students and teachers.

Yet despite the children's definite enjoyment of their time at this school, some students had a few requests. One student had recently attended a science demonstration at a local private school and asked that Pratham include more experiments and science education. Pratham will therefore make a strong effort to add some science to its curriculum. When asked by the teacher if they wanted to learn English, all the students raised their hands and let out a loud note of affirmation. Pratham's journey towards meeting this request has already begun.

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Although Pratham certainly grants illiterate and out-of-school children many opportunities for education, the organization needs records of what these children eventually do—whether they stay in school, whether they pursue a college degree, whether they acquire a stimulating job—in order to accurately judge its progress. Several children in South Shahdara who joined Pratham in 1999, the first year the organization came to the area, returned to the Pratham office and spoke about their post-Pratham lives.

First came Asma, a thirteen-year-old girl in Class VIII. A dark, coy girl with wavy hair who came wearing a traditional black *salwar kameez*, Asma helps her mother make undershirts in the evenings, a job that often cuts into her studying time. Sitting up perfectly straight, this young Muslim girl revealed a straight set of white teeth when she smiled. She holds a strong passion for art and takes a drawing class as an elective at her school. Asma gladly demonstrated her talent and her keen eye for symmetry by drawing a flower-studded vase-shaped fishbowl holding a detailed, smiling fish. She enjoys dancing to music from Indian films and names Salman Khan as her favorite actor.

Asma lives in a one-room ground-floor flat that has two sewing machines to increase shirt production. One light bulb in the middle of the room suspended from a long wire attached to the ceiling serves as the family's only source of artificial light. An open door lets a small amount of sunlight onto a cracked concrete floor, upon which stands a fridge, a twin bed, and a small counter that holds a few cups and dishes. This room houses Asma, her five siblings, her mother, and her father. Ever since a dog bit the girl's father and gave him an incurable disease, Asma's mother has supported the family financially. She sells her undershirts at 25 rupees per dozen and receives an average of 75 rupees, about \$1.60, per day. This family has done better than many others in the area, however, so Asma's mother thanks Allah daily for what she does have. A generous woman, Asma's mother insisted that three of her guests drink two bottles of cold soda she had bought, a heavy investment for her small income.

Perhaps because of this unflagging generosity, Asma now receives her mother's full support for her education. Her mother says that whenever Asma is called for class, assembly, or school function, she never stops the girl and allows her to go, quite a distinction for a working class mother. Asma's eldest sister is trying to pass an exam that will allow her entrance into a teacher's college. She did not pass the exam this year, but Tasleem Bano, head of



Asma sometimes felt shy when she was talking about her experiences

of the Pratham district of South Shahdara, offered her a job as a librarian in one of the local libraries. Pratham seems dedicated to helping all children in their area, not just the ones currently enrolled in its programs. In fact, the organization has had such an impact upon Asma that when her mother was asked what Asma enjoys doing, she replied, "Learning." This response evinces the tremendous impact that Pratham and Asma's schooling have had upon her. Asma's entire family now values education above most else.

Pratham began helping Asma on 24 July 1999, after members of the organization convinced her parents to let her join a *balwadi*. Since neither she nor her parents had ever gone to school before, joining the *balwadi* marked a significant commitment and a parental realization of the empowering potential of education. After attending the *balwadi* for one year, she joined a Pratham Bridge Program, which helps children who have fallen behind other students of their age to catch up. One year in this program allowed her to gain ad-

mission to an MCD school in Class III.

From Class VI, Asma has attended the Delhi government-run Kalya Vas School where she takes English, Hindi, math, science, and drawing in a class of sixty-one. She recognizes math and science as her favorite courses. Asma's school sits on a large plot of land surrounded by a formidable dark grey wall. The two-story beige building contains a large inner courtyard. Very wide corridors and high ceilings give the school a refreshing feeling of openness. Each classroom has a door made of a few vertical wooden planks bound by a diagonal plank from top-left to bottom-right. Rooms admit plenty of sunlight, so lights are often left off. Four white fans provide a welcome breeze and a monotonous whirr above the students in each room. Students seemed to have enough desks and class sizes were all around fifty. Besides the now barren sandy land, this school was in good condition.

Teachers, however, behaved in an unnecessarily brusque manner. In a curt two-minute statement, Asma's science teacher reported that the girl had above-average attendance. Most children attend one day of school for every four they take off; although Asma attended school significantly more often, her absences were still too frequent, she said. This teacher commented that proper Hindi—free of the slang and body language that comes from some slums—was Asma's greatest weakness. English also gave this girl some difficulty, as she had failed that subject in Class VII. Although a teacher's recommendation did allow her to proceed to Class VIII, Asma remained an average, albeit comparatively dedicated, student. Yet most would expect such mediocrity from a first-generation stu-



Asma's mother sits by one of her sewing machines

dent. Yet most would expect such mediocrity from a first-generation stu-

dent. Pratham has already started this family on the journey towards education. If Pratham continues to work with Asma and her family, her children could very well excel when they go to school.

One of Asma's best friends and her neighbor, Gulbakawili came wearing a traditional green *salwar kameez* and a red shawl. A fair girl with slightly crooked teeth, Gulbakawili helps her mother sew comforters in the evening. She also fastens glistening colored stones onto golden bracelets to create beautiful combination pieces of jewelry that she sells as an additional source of income. She shares Asma's passion for dance and affection for Salman Khan, but in school she opts for a home science course that teaches her cooking and other homemaking skills in addition to a drawing course.

Gulbakawili lives just a few doors away from Asma. Her house consists of two rooms, each with one bed. A thin colored sheet divides the two rooms and a three-person sofa sits opposite the bed in the first room. With a smooth floor of mosaic tiles, pale green walls, and a pale yellow ceiling, the interior of this house differs greatly from its crumbling brick exterior. One wall in the second room supports a bookcase, on the top shelf of which stand a proud silver trophy and several large silver plates. Gulbakawili has eight siblings; the younger ones seemed fixed to the small black television placed in the corner on the top shelf of the bookcase. Below the television, incidentally tuned to the children's channel Pogo, lie several more shelves, which hold the comforters that Gulbakawili's mother makes. She makes these exquisitely stitched covers in two or three days and usually receives 100 rupees, about \$2.15, for each one.



A smiling Gulbakawili demonstrates a fundamental law of mathematics



Gulbakawili's 105-year-old grandfather

Gulbakawili's family not only supports itself, but the girl's 105-year-old grandfather, as well. Married at the age of ten to a girl only two-and-a-half years old, this man retains the vigor and alertness of a youth. He takes a long walk around the community every day to stay fit and prove his remaining vitality. His memory remains sharp and he revels in reciting couplets of deep Muslim poetry. When asked what the secret to his long life was—fish?, ghee?, vegetables?—a wide but toothless grin broke through his wizened face. "Character," he said, "I fed on good character."

Yet one hundred and five years of good character was not enough for Gulbakawili's grandfather to initially realize the value of education.

Zeenat, now one of Pratham's district administrators, said that she had to visit Gulbakawili's house many times to overcome parental disinterest with education before any of Gulbakawili's siblings were allowed to attend Pratham programs. She said that at first, Gulbakawili's mother and father felt that their troublesome children needed to learn how to work properly and wanted that none of them waste their time at school. Slowly, Zeenat coaxed the parents into allowing their children to attend a *balwadi*, primarily by guaranteeing that she would leave them enough time to finish their work at home. Every morning, Zeenat gathered the family's children thirty minutes before the *balwadi* started in order to guarantee attendance. After the eldest of the siblings began attending regu-

larly, he came back home every day fresh with stories about the wonderful time he had had at the *balwadi* performing plays and learning to read. Eventually, as more of the family's children began coming home raving about the *balwadi*, Gulbakawili's parents began willingly sending their children to Pratham. Eventually, all but Gulbakawili's eldest sister, who married at a young age, entered school after participating in a Pratham program. Even



Some of the beautiful jewelry that Gulbakawili makes

her parents. From there, she and Asma traveled together: one year through the *balwadi*, another in a Bridge Course, and then into Class III at the same MCD. They still attend the same senior secondary school, but are in separate sections of Class VIII. Gulbakawili's section has forty-three students, significantly fewer children than Asma's. Gulbakawili takes the same core courses as Asma and also recognizes math and science as her favorite subjects. She demonstrated on paper the practical use of a fundamental law of exponents. She could not, however, solve a simple algebraic equation, a topic that students in Class VIII should know.

Few teachers in Gulbakawili's school knew of the Pratham organization and thus deemed it impossible to universally compare students who had gone through the Pratham system with those who had not. Three of her subject teachers—in drawing, math, and science—did, however, praise Gulbakawili's talent. Deshbala, a drawing teacher in the school for twenty-four years, said she drew very well for the small amount of practice she had had. She declared definitively that Gulbakawili performed better than most other students. Alka, a math teacher for four years, echoed this view with a confident, "This girl is good." She pointed out, however, that almost all students perform poorly in mathematics, which perhaps explains, but does not justify, Gulbakawili's inability to solve an equation. This deficiency should not hide the progress that Gulbakawili has made with the help of Pratham—she overcame initially reluctant parents to become a fairly good student at a large government school.

Once Gulbakawili does finish school, she feels she may go into teaching, but maintains that no matter where she goes, her education will play an essential role in her success. Gulbakawili feels that Pratham has helped her education tremendously. Perhaps this debt is best felt during the area's annual cooking festival. Every year, the

after these children left the *balwadi*, Zeenat still took tremendous care of them. She helped one eager boy earn a college degree in engineering and get a job that pays 5500 rupees per month, comparatively a very high salary. Only one elder girl, who married at a young age, never attended school. Pratham has had an immense impact not only on the education of these children, but on the attitude of their parents towards schooling. Eight children who otherwise would have lived illiterately in the slums have been granted a myriad of opportunities, from engineering to teaching, that will help them succeed both financially and intellectually.

So on 24 July 1999, Gulbakawili entered the same *balwadi* as Asma, also on the bidding of



Swati displays some of her intricate henna artistry

first place Gulbakawili brings her food is not her friends, not her cousins, not her siblings, but the local Pratham office.

Swati, a younger girl who came wearing the modern combination of jeans and a traditional top, has remarkably managed not only to attend Class VI at age ten, but to rank first in each of her subjects as well. She has an active out-of-school life and enjoys playing *Oonch Neech*, a variation of Tag, with her four best friends Geeta, Bhaavana, Kaveena, and Kavita. A talented henna artist, Swati often draws the *mehendi* for many people in the area on holidays. As the daughter of one of Pratham's administrators, Swati has always had parental support for her education. Even so, she attended a Pratham *balwadi* for one year before entering school. Swati enjoyed the *balwadi*'s style of instruction, full of interactive poems, stories, plays, and painting. She said that this program gave her an edge over the other students in her school and helped put her at the top of her class.

After admission to a government school, Swati learned the core subjects of Hindi, English, math, and science. Although she is best at Hindi and English, Swati named English, typically a language many children find very difficult, as her favorite subject and successfully read a children's play that some interviewers presented her. Swati commented that she looks forward to speaking fluently. Besides these core subjects, Swati excels at dance and drawing and actively participates in cultural events held by the school.

Clearly a talented girl, Swati receives tremendous praise from her teachers. Khima Sharma taught Swati from Class I until Class V. She has taught for fourteen years in the Sarvodaya Kalya Vas School, the same school from which she graduated. Her school runs Monday through Saturday from 7 AM to 12:30 PM in the summers and 7:30 to 12:30 in the winter. Every day, her students receive small class tests, which are then followed by unit tests every week and session tests each quarter. Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation Program (CCEP) multiple-choice tests are administered by the government every quarter. Although approximately eight of the forty students in her class fail each CCEP exam, Swati has passed every one. In fact, Ms. Sharma named Swati among her top



Classrooms in Swati's school are often crowded

students in her fourteen years of teaching. She said that, except for one fourth-place finish, this girl ranked in the top three in every subject in every year. Although many students never finished their homework or even their classwork, Ms. Sharma said that Swati always completed it flawlessly. Unlike some of her students, Swati was always well-disciplined and never rowdy. Ms. Sharma credited this etiquette to the Pratham *balwadi*. She feels that students who come directly into school without first attending a *balwadi* lack basic skills such as the knowledge of the names of familiar objects, the ability to listen attentively, and even the capacity to use the toilet. Very few of the non-Pratham children can read.

Swati's current Class VI teacher, Laxmi Mittal, had similar praise for Swati and Pratham. Although she does not teach the lower classes and so cannot comment on the Pratham *balwadis*, Ms. Mittal said that if Swati represents Pratham's work, then the organization has done a very fine job. Despite her praise for Swati, Ms. Mittal had some harsh words about the quality of her school. Seventy children per class is simply unmanageable—the teacher can neither keep children under control nor ensure that they are learning properly. Usually, the school lacks electricity for three out of the five hours that school is in session. During this time, children must languish in a hot, dark room without light and without fans. Even when the school has power, several children must sit on the cracking cement floor in the small space between six rows of three-person benches and the long pedestal in front of the chalkboard. One of the four fans in the room is broken and only three bare incandescent bulbs cling to the aging white ceiling. Ms. Mittal also said that the government often provides an impractical English syllabus. Only ten out

of the seventy students can satisfactorily read the Class VI English book, which leaves the teacher with the difficult decision of promoting the sixty failing children to the next class where classwork is even harder, or deciding to hold the child back and risking his disinterest and eventual dropout. To help these teachers, Pratham has quietly launched a school-improvement program that many in the organization feel has great potential. Some warn, however, of the conflict that might result between Pratham and the school principals if too many improvements come too quickly. Hopefully, the organization and the schools can agree to work together to achieve the common goal of a good education for children everywhere.

Swati herself will finish at least Class XII, her mother guaranteed. After that, Swati hopes to attend college. Because of Swati's universal excellence, the girl's mother said that Swati has not yet decided what she would like to pursue. But Swati's mother did commend Pratham for its help with her daughter. Before Pratham entered the area, Swati's mother worked for the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), which has also tried to educate children in India.



Naveen was the most talkative of the children

Once she joined Pratham, however, she said that she felt something different about the organization: a feeling of family, of incorporation and community, that convinced her to stay with Pratham.

Two boys, Tapan and Naveen, and one girl, Nisha, all attended the same Pratham *balwadi* in 1999. Tapan, a nine-year-old, attends Class III in the private Balprakash School. Naveen, a confident thirteen-year-old Class VI student in a government school, wore a Sania Mirza T-shirt and proved extremely talkative. And Nisha, though a quiet nine-year-old, attends Class III, also in a government school. Class size varies, from twenty-four in Nisha's class to thirty-seven in Tapan's and fifty-seven in Naveen's. All three chil-

dren have kept in contact since they graduated from the *balwadi*, an indication of the familial atmosphere that Pratham maintains. Nisha recalled fondly the plays and poems that the children recited together and remembered that she most enjoyed experimenting with colors. Both Tapan and Naveen have aspirations of becoming doctors, and both assured that they would stay in school until Class XII and then attend college. Although the children could not perfectly recall their marks in class, all were performing admirably in their schools. All the children noted that their parents supported their education. Naveen's two siblings also attend school, but of Tapan's older brother and sister, only the brother goes to school. These children liked all of their subjects, which were the same as those of the other students, but found English by far the most challenging. Although they could not read, they could say a few simple English phrases, such as "My name is..." and "How are you?" and eagerly looked forward to perfecting the language. Tapan and Naveen both love watching and playing cricket and hold Sachin Tendulkar and Virender Sehwag, both prominent Indian cricketers, as heroes. Although Nisha prefers cricketer Mahendra Singh Dhoni, she enjoys dancing to film songs much more than she likes cricket. Of the three children, Naveen became the chattiest and managed to maintain an hour-long conversation with the interviewer, who came from the other side of the world and had a vastly different background. Conversation ranged from movies to cars to



Tapan is one of the few in his neighborhood who is able to attend a private school



Nisha, a quiet Class III student

fruits. Such a talent will greatly facilitate this boy's educational and professional success. Despite their successes in school, these three children recalled the *balwadi* days as some of their finest.

Six children of different ages and varying backgrounds all lauded Pratham. Indeed, the organization's efforts have helped these children advance both educationally and personally. They have allowed two working girls who had never attended school to do so, helped a ten-year-old girl top every subject in Class VI, and created a bond of friendship between three young children. Stories like these exemplify Pratham's goals.

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Pratham's new English instruction progressed well. After receiving their plays, teachers began to pick roles in the play and read the lines. At first, reading came monotonously, with little feeling or inflection. No one paused after periods, and everyone instead read passages as long strings of words. After several readings and after the play had been re-translated into Hindi, however, teachers began improving their speech. They took the requisite small pauses after sentences and began injecting some emotion into their lines. Everyone has progressed admirably.



Pratham administrators get practice reading English while an instructor looks on

The range of abilities, however, is rather large. Some teachers can translate the entire play into Hindi without any help at all, but others need almost every word translated for them. All teachers recognize the English alphabet, something quite impressive, and can satisfactorily sound out most words. Longer words, such as "apologize", and some unfamiliar sounds, such as "saw", still cause some teachers problems. The combination of "o" and "w" causes confusion, since "how" and "crow" have the same two letters but different sounds. Consequently, some teachers pronounced "how" as "hoe" and "crow" as "crao", but by the end of the session, most of these confusions were sorted out. Some teachers also had problems pronouncing "eat" and "ate". Tense also confused a few teachers.

Most teachers seem interested in learning English, though shyness dominates their actions. Some teachers will not volunteer to play the larger parts in the play, but guarantee that they will stand up and read the whole play the next day, which displays impressive dedication.

Yet the largest problem remains one of emotion and understanding—how to connect with the language. To solve this problem, teachers will first act out the play in Hindi, with all appropriate body movements and voice inflection. They will then hopefully understand the proper expression used for each line and incorporate that emotion into their English readings. Hopefully this strategy will eliminate the monotony in their speech altogether.

10 August 2006

In preparation for the large kite flying festivities on 15 August, India's Independence Day, Pratham students at the DCCW constructed their own kite. When the children learned of their surprise task, a resounding cheer rose even from the most taciturn of students. Although most kitemakers use paper in their designs, this particular kite used plain white plastic. Children first colored the kite in order to make it appropriate for celebration. Crimson and vibrant blue colors soon filled outlines of five-petal flowers. Many children fought for the two thick black markers so that they could strike their name boldly onto the kite's white face. Students did, however, insist

that the smiling yellow Pratham logo occupy the center of the logo. Although one student did misspell Pratham as “Partham”, this decision exemplifies the children’s feelings towards the organization.

Once the children had finished coloring, two or three children identified themselves as avid kite fliers and kite builders. Without even consulting the instructions, they confidently alerted the child who had read the instructions



Children at the DCCW love flying kites

that he had braced the kite backwards. They then proceeded to brace the kite properly and string it, all without taking heed of the instructions. One of the Pratham officers said that the children were all wrong and had put the string on backwards. He took it upon himself to restring it the “proper” way and soon had himself nine different bets of 50 rupees each that he himself had done it wrong.

When the officer went to launch the kite, he found that it drifted haphazardly for a few seconds, turned itself flat, and then crashed definitively into the ground. Students gave him a good-natured cheer and then demanded their 450 rupees. The children took control again and restrung the kite their way. Twenty feet of string was let loose and a tall student in a blue shirt threw the kite up as a shorter student in red tugged on the string to cajole it higher. This time, the kite floated five feet in the air, did a flip, a half-turn, and then crashed definitively into the ground. The Pratham officer let out a lonesome yell and chided the children for their own folly.

After half an hour of sustained attempts, someone decided to finally consult the instructions. Quickly, students strung up the kite the official way and let it loose once more. This kite never even left the ground. When some other students went to give the instructions an even closer look, another child found a wide red paper kite. By the time the other students had finished their examination, these children had the red kite flying stably at

least twice as high as the plastic kite had ever flown. Hopefully, children in DCCW will duplicate the passion and talent that they had for the kite in their education.

Instructors scheduled the teachers’ English class for 11:45, but at that time there were but a few teachers ready. Some teachers suggested that the others had lost interest, not unlikely for middle-aged women trying to learn a tough language. Others simply said that the others had too much work to do. Nonetheless, by 12:15, most teachers had turned up, and instruction began. Teachers read the same play once or twice more, but a few of the best speakers were asked to memorize a particular part of the play for homework in order to truly connect with the language. Many of the teachers said, however, that finding time to sit down and memorize the play at home would prove impossible because of their hectic professional lives and myriad household tasks.

As another route to gaining the necessary emotion required in English, instructors planned to show the teachers scenes from Hindi movies and translate the dialogues into English. As the teachers then read their lines, they could try to inject as much emotion into their line as the actor had injected into his. Additionally, instructors asked teachers to each pick one joke in Hindi and try to translate and read it the following day. These methods should help build confidence in speaking and help the teachers speak with emotion.

Although two or three teachers clearly dominate the class, most teachers are improving at least slightly their English vocabulary and pronunciation. When the instructors asked if teachers could come early the following day, the teachers all replied negatively and cited their demanding household and professional responsibilities. De-

spite these difficulties, many teachers still volunteer to learn English, showing both an eagerness and dedication that will only benefit the teachers if sustained.

23 August 2006

South Shahdara, however, is a “five-star” slum. After all, the district has roads, its people live in sturdy buildings—in fact, South Shahdara has its very own x-ray and ultrasound center. This district was also Pratham’s first in Delhi, so many children here have already made tremendous progress.

On the other side of Delhi lies a small area called Zakhira. Three railroad tracks imprison the citizens of this illegal district in an almost equilateral triangle. Trash, urine, and defecation clog the tracks, but trains barge past the area without stopping. Cars zipping past on the flyover above barely hazard a glance into the shanty below. Lucky families have roofs of corroding corrugated metal. Unlucky ones stretch sheets of black plastic across their cracking plaster walls and weigh them down with bricks. No one has water in this area: families must risk the journey across the tracks to a nearby water spigot and



Zakhira sits between three dangerous train lines



A dog sits among the filth

haul back gallons of water in bulky plastic tanks each day. A foreboding silence rests over this airy space—perhaps in remembrance of the young child who was recently run over by a train as he followed his mother to work. When the police came, the mother had to pretend the late child was not hers in order to avoid punishment for endangering the lives of those aboard the train and to ensure that the authorities did not destroy this illegal community. Unlike South Shahdara, where many residents work as domestic helpers, most families in Zakhira have set up small micro-enterprises. One family made and sold tea, while another made small goods to sell at a nearby market. Others earned 45 rupees, less than one dollar, to extract iron from factory waste. Maruti, a major car manufacturer in India, used many families in this area to make auto parts cheaply. One woman earned 10 to 15 rupees, about 26 cents, per day to shape some of the auto maker’s rubber parts. Compared to Shahdara, Zakhira was hopelessly destitute.

When Pratham set up a program in this area in 2005, many members of the organization saw this venture as one of its most difficult. Because of Zakhira’s even greater poverty, many parents are far more reluctant to send their children to Pratham programs. Many residents of Zakhira rarely stay in the area for more than a few months, which makes it very difficult for Pratham to teach something substantial. Furthermore, children must cross the railroad tracks in order to get to the nearest school, a journey that most parents dare not risk. Nevertheless, Rachna, the Pratham area head of Zakhira, estimates that as of 2006, the organization has put 220 of the 3300 children in the area into direct Pratham programs. Most of Pratham’s children here participate in L2R (Learn to Read) programs that help them achieve the expected literacy and mathematical level for their age. Additionally, Pratham’s

library serves all the children in the area. During Pratham's second year in Zakhira, Rachna aims to double the number of Pratham teachers in the district and continue Pratham's quick expansion into the area.

One of the first to commend the success of Pratham was Rajendra Kumar, the former president of Zakhira's Traders Association and BJP General Secretary for the district of Karolbagh. In 1952, Kumar's family moved to Zakhira from Lahore, a city placed in Pakistan after Partition. In 2001, he tried to set up an educational program of his own, but unfortunately saw it decline very quickly. Soon after Pratham entered the area, Kumar said he saw an almost immediate change. Children in Zakhira previously knew nothing of India's Independence Day, 15 August, but this year had a giant festival to commemorate the date. Zakhira soon found itself swarming with children able to count and to read the Hindi script, something that almost no one in the area could do before.



An aerial view of Zakhira

Kumar has since worked hard to convince residents of Zakhira to send their children to Pratham.

Besides the L2R programs, Pratham has set up several *balwadis* in the area. One Pratham teacher held her *balwadi* in a small open hut barely the width of two steps. White cement towards the front of the hut yielded to dark green wood towards the back of the structure. Bricks held down a broken roof of corrugated metal. No light bulbs lit the room, and the small amount of sunlight that made it through the tiny door was inadequate for reading. Nonetheless, *balwadi* students brought a good amount of charm to the building and covered the walls with colorful cutouts of butterflies, paintings of green landscapes, and a clothesline draped with countless vibrant books. Although three or four children walked out of the *balwadi* unchallenged, most of the children seemed alert and attentive.



One of the many balwadi classes in Zakhira

Some of the parents, however, voiced significant concerns. One, Shamima Khatoum, complained that Pratham had helped her child gain admission to an MCD school a while back, but the school still lacked teachers and an administration and had not yet opened. "What is the point of all this learning, then?" she said. Another parent, a tall man named Shambhu Dayal, tried to console Shamima and said that everything would work out if she had patience. Rachna overheard this conversation and said that if the school did not open very soon, she would lead the community in a march on the offices of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi.

Pratham set up many other *balwadis* wherever space could be found. Some of the *balwadis* had full attendance, but others only had four or five children. One *balwadi* consisted of twenty-eight children sitting on

four mats outside a blue-walled house with a picture of Shiva on it. Another took place in a very small, very dark room a few feet away, and another in a courtyard a bit further off. This type of adaptability is impressive, but the differences between the nicest *balwadis* and the worst were perhaps too large.

Pratham's library took place behind a small white brick wall that provided a bit of shade. Twenty-one children sat comfortably on several mats set up in a large rectangle. Most seemed enchanted by the books that they were reading, but one child had gone further and had actually composed a poem. He had given the words a rainbow-colored background and read with an unwavering rhythm. After finishing his reading, this boy beamed proudly as his audience of fellow library students applauded.



Shamima Khatoum complained about the MCD's failure to open schools in Zakhira

But the children themselves had some very interesting stories. Razia Sultana, a ten-year-old girl who recently moved from Bihar attended some classes at a Madrassa. Roshan, her mother, says that her Razia's attendance was intermittent at best. After several months of classes, Razia had still learned almost no Urdu, and her family gave up. They moved to Zakhira, where they enrolled her in an L2R program. Razia spoke no Hindi before attending the class, but after eight months of L2R, she could successfully read a children's book called *Chanda Mama Aur Sitare (The Moon and the Stars)*. When asked if Razia had a job, Roshan quickly declared that she had none. "They're kids. They should be learning and playing, not working," Roshan said pleadingly, realizing that very few people in the area accepted her philosophy. Razia has since gained admission in an MCD school, but the school is yet to open. Hopefully, the school will open soon so that Razia can continue her educational journey without much interruption. Perhaps the upper administration of Pratham should get more involved in petitioning the government for the opening of this, and other, MCD schools.

Munna, a shy twelve-year-old boy in Class V, had never gone to school before. After his birth in Zakhira, Munna moved with his mother, Saraswati, to a village where the concept of education hardly existed. Although he tried to learn a little bit at home with his mother, his attempts were wholly unsuccessful. He moved back to Zakhira slightly over a year ago and heard that a woman named Sushila was holding classes in the area. After studying for three months in an L2R program with Sushila, he began studying with Prem, one of the most beloved Pratham teachers in the area. Prem and Sushila taught Munna to read fluently in eight months through the use of a Hindi primer book that Munna said he loved. When he came home one day and wrote his name for his mother, Saraswati began to cry and covered Munna with kisses. Saraswati said that Munna now values his education above almost anything else and studies much more than he plays. When asked if Munna worked, Saraswati said jokingly, "He won't do anything!" Indeed, Pratham has helped Munna advance from a life of perpetual work to one of constant education. In just eight months, Pratham put a child who had never learned before into Class V. Pratham must continue this brand of work.



Niraj and his mother, Neelam

A bright-eyed boy wearing a blue flower-patterned collar shirt and grey pants introduced himself as Niraj. Neelam, the mother of this ten-year-old boy, put him in a nursery at the age of three, when they used to

live in Modi Nagar. Later on, the family moved to a village, where Niraj stopped learning. Two years ago, he came to Zakhira, where he decided to continue his education. Although he already knew how to read and write before he came to Pratham, the nearest MCD school had turned him away when he had come to apply solely because of apathy. Neelam then put the boy into a Pratham L2R program so that he did not forget what he had learned. After three months with Prem, he successfully gained admission to Class V through the intervention of Pratham. Niraj said that he really enjoyed his L2R program and felt that Prem taught very well. He said that he used to learn math with bundles, an easy way to demonstrate place values, and still names math as his favorite subject. He also enjoys the computer classes that he receives at the MCD school. An avid viewer of Hindi films, Niraj said that had he not gotten involved with Pratham, he would have spent his time playing games and watching movies. He now says that he prefers education to both of these pursuits. It seems that Pratham can even play a vital role in helping those who can already read. Niraj's story only widens Pratham's accomplishments and potential.



Sometimes balwadi stories even enchant adults

After this story of a boy who knew almost everything comes a story of a girl who knew almost nothing. Deepika came wearing a pink flower shirt and a blue skirt. She attended an MCD school until Class V, when it became clear that Deepika had learned nothing. She could not read, nor could she do simple mathematics. So Deepika's mother, Sushma, decided to enroll her in a Pratham L2R class to try to help her. After studying with Prem for eight months, she has learned to read fluently and proudly read a story about the Arabian Nights. She now attends Class V again. Although she used to hate it, she said that she now praises Prem for tearing her away from her daily Tom and Jerry cartoon to attend the L2R program. Sushma said that Deepika now insists on going to school, even if she is sick or



Saira cares for both Deepika (left), her niece, and Sonu, a girl who lives alone

hungry or thirsty. Deepika now names Hindi, a topic she hated for five years, as her favorite subject. Just like Niraj, Deepika said that she would have spent her time playing hide and seek or *stapu*, a common game played with stones, had Pratham not begun educating her after she had dropped out of school. But Deepika was never far from being prodded towards education. Her aunt, a tall proud woman named Saira, is the *de facto* woman leader of the community. She has had an invaluable role in helping Pratham reach the parents most stubbornly against education. She told many tales of going to certain houses and convincing parents. "Sometimes with love, sometimes with anger—but I always won in the end," Saira said about her efforts. Deepika's story is another of Pratham's great successes, but Saira's is an example of what Pratham should try to

do in every community: convince the people with power in each neighborhood about the value of education, and let them do the rest.

One of the most remarkable stories in this area comes from a ten-year-old girl in a light-blue shirt named Sonu. She and her father left her mother in Bihar and came to Zakhira eight or nine months ago. She lives at home essentially alone: her father leaves early every morning for work and returns angrily late every night. Even at such a young age, Sonu does all the cooking and cleaning required at home. She may never leave the house, or her father, whom Sonu mortally fears, with beat her. In fact, the only time she may leave her house is when she goes to attend a Pratham program. Originally, Sonu's father was one of the most anti-education parents in Zakhira. He

insisted that Sonu needed to work and that she would never learn anything in the L2R programs. But Saira eventually coaxed two or three days out of Sonu's father, and he saw an immediate improvement in his daughter's education. Sonu knew no Hindi before attending the L2R program, but after eight months, she can speak quite well and read satisfactorily. She said that her father now loves that his daughter can read. She has now gained admission to an MCD school, but joins the very angry children whose promised school has not yet opened. Hopefully Sonu and all the other children will soon start attending their school and continue unimpeded on their quest towards knowledge. Pratham has started their journey, but a journey is nothing with completion.

Even in Zakhira, an area plagued by disease, malnutrition, and constant danger, Pratham has managed to begin educating children. Despite their need for food and money, many children and parents have realized education's benefits and accepted Pratham's assistance.

Suggestions

- Pratham has successfully taught many children to read fluently. Most children do, however, read without emotion. In order to bring out fully a child's emotion and enthusiasm, Pratham should consider adding assignments that require creativity to its curriculum. Instead of having a child read the same story over and over again, encourage the child to come up with a new ending to the story. Instead of simply doing board after board of similar math sums, come up with word problems that stress the practical application of math. Children will realize why $373 + 457$ really matters if they can relate the problem to their lives. Instead of encouraging the practice of some librarians of arbitrarily handing out new books to children as soon as they finish an old one, give each child a little bit of time to really understand what he has read. Ask him to talk about it and tell him to ask questions. Have several children read the same book one day and hold a discussion about the book. Such interactive exercises will eventually ensure that children learn much more and will retain what they have learned as well.
- Although Pratham does find its teachers from the local community, the organization should make a strong attempt to increase its image in the community. Even most teachers in MCD and government schools did not know the organization existed. As an educational organization, Pratham must make absolutely sure that teachers and principals, at least, know what the organization does and that it actually exists. In order to build such an image, Pratham should first convince the community leaders, as it has begun to do in Zakhira. These respected members of the community will then have much more success convincing reluctant parents in the community to join Pratham than the organization, which may be viewed antagonistically, will. Pratham should launch a vigorous educational awareness program in each community that actively informs residents about the benefits of education, either through holding speeches or through pictorial posters. If community awareness increases, Pratham's job will become much easier, and Pratham's success will become much greater.
- Many children and parents have asked for the addition of English and science in Pratham's curriculum. Pratham should try to meet these requests quickly. Simple science experiments can be made with very cheap materials. Pratham need only buy vinegar and baking soda to demonstrate an explosive chemical reaction that releases carbon dioxide. One of the children's favorite forms of entertainment, the kite, can show a practical application of Bernoulli's Principle, the same mechanism by which a plane flies. Almost all children will enjoy demonstrations like these, so adding them to the curriculum will probably result in greater attendance and interest. If finances permit, buying a simple science kit might also prove rewarding. English will prove a harder venture, since children have no environment in which to practice the language, and very few teachers can speak well enough to teach. Pratham sometimes receives volunteer requests from many English-speaking people, who may be able to teach for the duration of their stay. Since the alphabet is rather easy to teach, and since

85% of English is phonetic, perhaps giving children the same book in both Hindi and English, or having books in which one page is in Hindi and the opposite page is in English, will provide children enough comparison to strengthen their vocabularies. Perhaps libraries could hold English discussion periods in which children reflect on the book they just read—in English—to practice speaking. In order to eliminate grammatical errors that children may have despite reading the books, maybe one librarian per district should undergo a basic English course at a language school, if finances permit. Science and English especially will expand the opportunities available to children many times. Pratham should try to add these courses to its curriculum as quickly as possible.

- Perhaps Pratham should eliminate the *balwadis* in the most dingy of conditions and merge them with some of the nicer ones. Teachers should of course move along with the children to maintain the twenty-to-one ratio, but such consolidation might provide for a more conducive learning environment. Especially in Zakhira, some *balwadis* took place in very dark and cramped conditions while



One of the best-attended balwadis in Zakhira

some others were held in open and bright spaces. Additionally, some *balwadis* had very few children in attendance. Perhaps merging the smaller and dingier *balwadis* with some of the better ones would give children a better learning environment and help keep attendance up.

- One of Pratham's greatest challenges is providing enough books for its programs. Perhaps members of Pratham overseas could help in this area. Currently, overseas programs mostly consist of ever-important fundraising drives, but very few people outside of India have experience directly helping children in the slums. The leaders of Pratham Books commented on how difficult they found it to find good authors, find good pictures, and then send the books off for an initial translation, a number of edits, and a final translation. Many people in the United States travel around the country frequently, and most take lots of pictures as well. If some people in the US or UK could write short accounts or stories of their journeys in children's language and provide some pictures with them, Pratham Books would find itself with much more material to work with. Additionally, perhaps some people overseas might help with translating books. Several members of the Indian diaspora maintain their culture and language, so finding a Gujarati or Hindi translator would prove fairly easy. Furthermore, Pratham Books might consider begin selling books to Hindi schools in the US and the UK. Of extremely high quality both pictorially and literarily, the books should have substantial appeal among Indian schools abroad. Although the books only cost Rs. 25 (approximately \$0.53) in India, they should easily fetch at least two dollars in the US, which should both cover shipping costs and help Pratham Books decrease its reliance on donations. Pratham USA and Pratham UK should consider starting such a books program.

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