

From darkness unto light

Akshara foundation has initiated 20,000 slum children into education by integrating private, voluntary and government sectors.

SMALL drops in an ocean. This is how the people at Akshara describe their efforts. All this despite the fact that 20,000 children in slums around Bangalore have already been initiated into the world of letters by this foundation through its educational programme.

Inspired by Pratham, an organisation in Mumbai and other like-minded organisations, which strive for making education available to every child, Akshara was established as a charitable trust two years ago uniting the private, voluntary and government sectors. With majority of the funds from Rohini Nilekani, one of the trustees of the organisation, and the rest from the Government of Karnataka and other organisations like the Azim Premji Foundation, George Foundation, BPL, Mindtree Consulting and individuals, Akshara seeks to engage children between the age groups of three and 10 in joyful learning.

"Akshara is a small step in bringing the community together for a common cause," says Rohini Nilekani. What Rohini describes as a small step has in two years seen more than 20,000 children interact with 1,372 volunteers in various educational programmes in different parts of the city.

The fact that the organisation has achieved so much reflects on the aspirations of the children who want to learn if given the opportunity, feels Rohini. Another reason for their success, has been the educational programmes which have found acceptance with both children and parents. In the Balwadi programme aimed at children in the age groups three and six, the emphasis is on fun-filled education. Here the kids are taught alphabets, rhymes and engaged in basics. "This pre-school concept is something new and people living in such difficult conditions don't understand the need to send their children to such classes. But despite such reservations we have managed to enroll 19,737 children for this Balwadi programme," explains Rohini.



IN-FOCUS

Re-engaging school drop-outs and offering them an intensive refresher course is the Bridge course. The basic idea behind this programme was to help children between the age groups of six and 10, needing orientation before going to formal school. According to Rohini, older children who have undergone this programme have been allowed to go back to the class of their age by the gov-

ernment. Another course that has met with good response is the Jnana Jyothi programme, a remedial class for slow learners in school. The need for such a programme stemmed from the fact that there were children, who in spite of being in school for three years, had not developed basic literacy skills.

Akshara doesn't have any centres of its own and hence makes

use of rooms in schools and living rooms of local residents to conduct its classes. "We are trying to convince the Government to give us centres so that our programmes can be carried out effectively," says Rohini. The teachers in Akshara are not degree-holders but young girls who have just passed their tenth standard or pre-university. These girls who are residents of the same locality volunteer to help and earn just about Rs 250 as monthly stipend with some educational aids given by Akshara to conduct classes. "Many of the teachers say that their image has improved in the community after working for Akshara and feel that they are doing a good job," says Rohini. Apart from the affection that the little ones give their teacher, parents also pay whatever they can to the teacher.

To involve individuals from all walks of life in its goal, Akshara has a guardian programme where individuals or companies adopt a local Balwadi or bridge course and help by taking class once every two weeks. "The corporate sector has played an important part in this programme with employees from companies like Texas Instruments coming forward to engage the class in story telling, painting and drawing," says Rohini. Looking back at the growth and change that Akshara has brought in the lives of the children some of them who have gone on to join private schools to continue their studies, Rohini says that their work will go on until the government takes over or till local solutions are found.

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