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ned citizens. By 'enlightened', I encompass different categories: individuals who will be wealth creators, those who will contribute to nation-building through sheer hard work and those who will work to bring about development at a societal level. For all the talk about our demographic dividend, it is indisputable that if the young generation lacks education, it loses its employability and any dividend is a mirage.

A McKinsey report last year found that over 50 percent of the workforce is underqualified and if we do not take drastic measures, this number will grow much more in the next two decades, when more than 17 crore people will enter the workforce. We must serve our future citizens by moving beyond focussing purely on literacy — by upgrading our vocational education delivery and making the citizens empathetic and ready for the future.

All this requires extensive partnership between the government and the private sector. The government has the programmes, necessary funds that we can never match, a huge network and the reach required to effect change. NGOs, on the other hand, are always looking to try out new ideas in their quest to improve overall quality. The willingness to innovate is, indeed, key to making a paradigm shift. Innovation by its very nature entails failure; we need to build on these to discover approaches that do work. Unlike the government, NGOs can afford to take these risks. However, we need to accept that any change that we introduce has to be capable of being scaled up — a lot of entrepreneurs are happy with the work they are doing in a small catchment area. If we are to solve the problems of our country, we need more audacious and ambitious targets. **T**

As told to SHAILI CHOPRA



ROHINI NILEKANI | 54

CO-FOUNDER, PRATHAM BOOKS & FOUNDER-CHAIRPERSON, ARGHYAM

'We need to create physical and virtual libraries everywhere'

THE WORK of governments and NGOs over the past two decades has certainly helped millions of children, all first-generation learners, get into school and take their first steps towards reading. However, for a vast majority, there is almost nothing joyful or interesting for them to practise their newfound skills on. The children of our elite classes have access to books from around the world, but kids learning in their own languages have precious little children's literature to choose from.

The result is there for all to see, when survey after survey laments that one in two Class V children in India cannot read a passage fluently in any language. This is a national tragedy, as it becomes harder and harder to bridge the reading gap in later years. We have to catch the children young and prepare them for a society where textual knowledge is power and where reading is a fundamental requirement for self-empowerment.

In 1999, I was introduced to the work of the Pratham network, and felt the time was right to engage my time and money in working towards better primary education. I joined the Kar-



nataka chapter, called the Akshara Foundation, and chaired and funded it until 2009.

Meanwhile, we saw the need to set up a children's publishing house, and in 2004, I co-founded Pratham Books, an autonomous institution that aims to put "a book in every child's hands".

Pratham Books has tried to impact the ecosystem of children's writing, publishing and distribution, with some success. We are one of the largest publishers of children's books in India, and have produced more than 270 titles in up to 12 languages and sold and distributed more than 11 million books. We have a devoted group of writers and illustrators, and many volunteers who take our books to children in slums, hamlets and tribal areas.

Our books have gone to children through government procurement, community libraries, NGOs and private budget schools. We have also tried retail experiments such as selling story cards — sachet books priced at ₹2 — at kirana stores as well as riding on other distribution platforms, such as solar-lamp vendors.

We want to be able to go wherever children are, but reaching 230 million children through physical books may be environ-

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mentally unsustainable even if the books are shared multiple times. So we have had to formulate new approaches. Pratham Books has put out hundreds of books in the digital commons, which means they are free for all to access, download, print and even sell. We are future-proofing our work through this digital content and hope to do much more to make our books available across platforms.

Not for a moment do we think we can go it alone. We believe in creative collabora-

tion and collaborative creativity, and the open nature of our publishing system means that our books can be reshaped and retold, written anew and shared at zero cost. In one instance, we provided writers with the graphics of one story, and the same set of images yielded multiple engaging stories. Through our work, we are opening the field for other publishers, who are seeing the potential of a vast market of eager and untapped young readers.

Governments have a large part to play. Currently, government procurement is so ridden with corruption that even a cursory visit to school libraries will reveal how inappropriate and poor quality material reaches children. We need a national movement to create physical and virtual libraries everywhere. Technology has dropped the costs of publishing dramatically, and with the large volumes expected, we can give India's children wonderful books to read, which will empower them in many ways. Fluency in reading allows children to internalise the locus of their learning. What better way to get fluent than to curl up with an unputdownable book? We owe this to 230 million children. Now. ■

As told to SHAILI CHOPRA

SUNIL BHARTI MITTAL RAKESH BHARTI MITTAL

CO-FOUNDERS, BHARTI FOUNDATION

'Our schools reach out to more than 39,000 underprivileged kids'

STARTED IN 2000, Bharti Foundation, the philanthropic arm of telecom giant Bharti Enterprises, has taken up initiatives to educate and train the youth of India, with a particular focus on the rural girl child. In an interview with SHAILI CHOPRA, Sunil Bharti Mittal, CEO and Group Chairman, Bharti Enterprises and Rakesh Bharti Mittal, Co-Chairman, Bharti Foundation, talk about the need for more corporate intervention to ensure a better future for the country's youth.

EDITED EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW

❶ What inspired you to put your money into education? Is philanthropic intervention now an absolute necessity for education to succeed in India?

❷ Philanthropy has been an integral part of the Indian mainstream in the form of schools and colleges, but these initiatives were limited largely to bigger cities. Now, we have more resources and the net needs to be widened, focussing especially on rural India. Here, at Bharti, we identified education as one of the most important tools for social and economic development in India.

In 2000, we set up the Bharti Foundation with an aim to help underprivileged children and youth fulfill their potential. These youngsters, especially in rural areas, deserve an equal opportunity to be a part of mainstream economic reforms and enjoy its benefits. This is important for inclusive growth and for leveraging India's demographic dividend and supporting its future economic growth. Education and skills-training are keys to this and there