

Books: A Window to the World

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It is said that children are the future of society and books, its mirror. Textbooks alone are not enough to develop children's intellect. There is a world outside the classroom and books are an important part of this world. But in our country the number of good books available to children is very low. According to a survey, access to children's literature in India is limited to one book per five children: in comparison, in the United Kingdom it is six books per child. Such a huge difference! The government and society are not aware of this gap, even though everyone acknowledges that reading good books is very important for personality development.

Whenever there is a discussion on improving the education system or the teaching-learning process or when education policies are made, the concern for developing the reading habit and the importance of libraries to learn independently, is expressed. The Mudaliar Commission Report said that the library should be the most attractive place in the school. Books and libraries have been given great importance for the strengthening of basic literacy. The Draft National Education Policy 2019ⁱ also gives importance to the expansion of school and public libraries and to developing a culture of reading and communication.

From the very beginning libraries, where children can read books in addition to textbooks, have been an important and essential part of the various projects of the Eklavya Foundation's educational initiatives. The aim has been to develop a culture of reading and performing various activities based on books. About three decades ago, our country neither had the reading culture nor were books available, especially in Hindi-speaking areas. We, at Eklavya, felt that there were not enough good-quality books for children on education and the number of publishers was also few. Though there was no demand, there was a definite need. Eklavya had learnt much from its experience in the field of education.

Need for children's books

From the educational point of view, there was a shortage of books in consonance with the age and interest of children. Some books were available, but they were very expensive and out of reach of the common person. Books in Hindi for early readers, adolescent and for creative activities were almost non-existent. Even for teachers, not many books were available and there were hardly any on pedagogy and even if there were some, it was difficult to follow them. Looking at this scarcity of books, Eklavya started its publication programme based on its experience of publishing *Chakmak*, *Shaikshik Sandarbh* and *Srote*. In the initial four to five years, Eklavya's books were used only in the areas where it operated. At that time, we had assumed that good English books in the Indian context were available, but only a few publication houses, such as the National Book Trust and the Children's Book Trust, were catering to Hindi and other languages. In the 1990s, after Eklavya had gained some experience in the field of publication, we realised that there was a dire shortage of children's literature not only in Hindi but also in English and other Indian languages and if we kept the availability of books to children in big cities aside, it was negligible for the rest.

Around 2011ⁱⁱ, the country's largest association of business institutions, FICCIⁱⁱⁱ (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry) began to consider publication as a separate sector. To understand the world of Indian publishing, FICCI initiated a publishing wing for undertaking surveys, seminars, workshops and studies related to publications. According to FICCI, in the area of publishing, India is among the top seven countries of the world.

Similarly, *Parag*, an initiative of the Tata Trusts, was set up to support the development of and access to good quality books in Indian languages for children. It has helped in the creation and spread of better

ⁱwww.nizamuddinrenewal.org for details

and original children's literature and consistently tried to improve the overall eco-system of children's literature. Under the *Parag* initiative, a study conducted by ValueNotes revealed that in the last two decades about one hundred publishers have emerged from the organised sectors, out of which around twenty publish quality, original content. There are about 2500 publishers for publishing books for children across the country but most of them publish only mediocre books. According to the same studyⁱⁱⁱ, conducted in 2013-14, the publishing market in the country is around Rs 11,500 crore of which children's literature market amounts to just Rs 600 crores but is growing at the rate of 20-25% annually. The market for children's literature is 5% of the total market size. The government has been the largest buyer of children's literature in the country and while 30% of the books are consumed in urban areas; 70% is meant for rural distribution.

Eklavya's portfolio

Developing and disseminating Eklavya's publications continued uninterrupted with the support of the Tata Trusts and some other institutions. The Tata Trusts study had also pointed to many other challenges in developing children's literature, such as lack of writing skills for children's literature, high cost of developing original children's literature, low remuneration and lack of recognition to the writers. Despite all these challenges, there are more than 450 books today in Eklavya's publications' portfolio, among these, one can find a variety of books catering to the varied interests of children, young readers, teachers and academicians. There are picture books, storybooks, poetry books, activity books, drama books, puzzle books, books on pedagogy and innovative textbooks. Books and literature have been developed in various formats—small and large books, accordion books, cards and posters—for readers to use these according to their needs.

To resolve the scarcity of quality educational supplementary books, Eklavya, along with some other organisations, such as Pratham, Tulika, Tara, Anveshi, Katha, A&A Publishers, Jyotsana Publications, CLR (Centre for Learning Resources), Sahmat etc. also published good books. Organisations like the National Book Trust, NCERT, Children's Book Trust, Navneet Publications, and Scholastic India were already working in this area.

By 2000, the number of books developed by Eklavya had reached around sixty. We participated

in various events such as the World Book Fair and our books received an encouraging response. Eklavya was not the only one publishing good children's and educational literature, some other organisations and publishers of the country were also doing excellent work in this field. But all faced the same problem of very limited channels for marketing and promotion.

The Pitara initiative

At this point of time, we thought of creating a space where not only our own books but all books and TLMs for children and education, developed by other publishers and institutions across the country could be made available to the public. So far, we had kept our books in a small, dark storeroom inside our office. When a new office space was set up for our director, who, till then, used to sit in the garage adjacent to our Bhopal office, we decided to convert the garage into a place where general public, teachers and employees of other institutions could come, see, read and buy the books. We named this place, *Pitara* and later it came to be known as, '*Pitara-One Stop Education Store*'. In Bhopal, the culture of reading had not yet developed, still, *Pitara* got a very good response. Encouraged by this, we started *Pitara* in Eklavya's Indore office and the response, there too, was very encouraging.

Next, we wanted to set up *Pitara* in all the cities across the country. Since the resources available to us are not enough, we thought of collaborating with institutions and small groups working in the field of education in various cities and started contacting them. Some institutions liked the initiative and *Pitara* started in cities like Durg, Faizabad, Mumbai, Udaipur, Kanpur, Calcutta, Delhi, Gurgaon, Jammu, Surat, Valsad, Patna, Raipur and Pune.

More than 2,500 selected books of nearly 50 institutions were kept in these *Pitaras* including books from the National Book Trust, Children's Book Trust, Tulika, Katha, Pratham, Navneet, NCERT, Vigyan Prasar, Paryavaran Edutech, Homi Bhabha Centre for Science, Nirantar, Sahmat, Arvind Kumar Publishers, Samavesh, Jodo Gyan, Navnirmitti and Montessori Child Education. We had both good and bad experiences as the expansion happened. The most difficult task was to sustain a division like *Pitara*. Wherever it could not be sustained (due to the low price or demand of the books), the institutions that supported it, came forward to provide *Pitara* with subsidies. The Tata Trusts also gave us initial

financial support to fulfil this dream. In about 10 years, *Pitara* had started in almost 22 cities across the country and we believed that we would be able to create a reading culture by disseminating quality children's and educational literature through *Pitara* in more than 50 cities across the country. But the books were not selling, and we were struggling financially. We had to accept the fact that though our purpose was to make good books available, our model of *Pitara* was, in a way, a loss-making model.

Though we were not very successful in running *Pitara* collaboratively, it was through it that we promoted books among NGOs working with children and in the field of education, in book fairs, various government schemes and during parent-teacher meetings. Due to Eklavya's extensive experience in the field of education, one of the achievements of *Pitara* was that we could provide quality books and a better resource of TLMs to readers at a much lower cost. We could also create trust among various institutions, academicians, parents and teachers associated with Eklavya that the books and educational materials in *Pitara* would be carefully chosen from the educational point of view. Also, it was convenient to be able to access all the selected books from all over the country under one roof. With the advent and growth of the internet, an online shopping portal, *pitarakart.com* was launched for the benefit of readers in the far corners of the country.

Meanwhile, there was a demand from various institutions and schools to orient them on how to use these books. So, we started organising workshops in Eklavya and other institutions. In order to develop a reading culture, we reached out to children and teachers through story-telling sessions in schools. The activities, craft, origami etc. from the science, social studies and language books were promoted extensively.

Children's books in rural areas

According to the Tata Trusts study, only 20% of the 70% books that are meant for rural distribution, reach the rural users. There is no data available on how many children open and read books. The library in many private schools exists solely for the purpose of showing it to the authorities in order to get recognition for the school.

According to a study^{iv} conducted by Eklavya in 17 villages of Dewas and Ujjain districts and in the Adivasi-dominated area of Shahpur in the Betul district of Madhya Pradesh, books were given the

last priority in a hundred families. Only one member of a family had gone to the district headquarters to buy a book. After this study, we tried to offer more concession on books so that more books could reach the villages. We also started putting up bookstalls in the weekly market (*village haat*) in rural areas and had many interesting experiences. Somebody commented that we must have got these books for free which was why we were selling them so lower prices. In a weekly market in the Dewas district, books were not being sold at all, but we were still happy and satisfied because children and women were looking at books, touching them and generally examining them. We found a child selling *jamuns* in the market. We bought the fruit for five rupees and were pleasantly surprised when that child came to our stall with five rupees and bought a book. It was a very gratifying incident for us, but the fact remained that the sale could not even cover our travel expenses. We continued our efforts to see that books reach rural areas but could not sustain it for economic reasons. Still, we are happy that the books are reaching the children in rural and remote areas through various projects of different institutions.

The situation in big cities

After a little exploration, we found that in no city were the books for children available under one roof. A few prominent publishers, who have their stores only in the big cities, sell and promote only their own publications. So, there was a paucity and unavailability of good books for children. Some institutions and publishing houses had started good initiatives, but their problem was the distribution of books. Most of the good literature that was developed remained in the warehouses. It was also a fact that there were no channels available in the market for low cost, good-quality books and that children do not have the freedom to buy books for themselves. Seeing the school as a channel, we tried to publicise books during parents' meetings. But the learning from this was that readers and parents in the Hindi regions do not spend much on books and the parents of elite schools find it below their dignity to buy low-priced books.

According to my experience, new parents are gradually understanding market trends; they buy books and are demanding good books from schools. The Kendriya Vidyalayas are encouraging children to read books, which is a positive step. According to the publication sector of FICCI, books have always been an essential medium for the

development and promotion of human values, catalysts for the upliftment of the nation, helping in preserving and spreading new ideas, providing education and values and thus, helpful in overall personal development.

Regardless of all the problems and expectations, the country's publishing sector is growing at an annual growth rate of 30%. But it remains to be studied in the future, as to how much original and good content is developed as part of this growth; how much of it is reaching the readers and how many people read or if the projected growth rate has been fudged. Also, what is the percentage of textbooks, keys or solution books, guides, religious and non-religious and political literature in this

figure of growth? Why would anyone bother to collect data about the exploitation of the writers and authors? Will it be possible for the common person to buy books? Who will tell us whether books are available in folk languages or not? If not, who will develop them?

Keeping in mind the critical challenge of sustainability, we are on a journey to fulfil our dream of meaningful education for all to build an egalitarian and just society on the path of sustainable development and we have one dream, hundreds of co-workers, thousands of authors and illustrators, and millions of readers with us. We hope that the current generation will move ahead to a better rate than one book per five children.

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