Akshara Foundation

Based on effective public-private partnership, the Akshara Foundation has designed many tools and programmes to provide quality universal education in India

Anil Swarup   17 Sep 2020 11:11 PM

As I point out in 'Ethical Dilemmas of a Civil Servant', when I was posted as Secretary, School Education Government of India in 2016, "I was the most 'uneducated' person to handle this sector" for want of experience in this sector. As the word went around about my 'illiteracy', there were those quintessential advisors who trooped in to advise me. The advice primarily was to learn from Finland, England, Holland, Scotland, New Zealand and all the lands of the world but I chose to go around the 'Motherland' to understand the problems that afflicted school education and to look for solutions. One such visit was to the interior areas of Karnataka where I 'discovered' one of the many solutions to poor quality of school education.

Also Read - Split to inaction

Akshara Foundation was established as a Public Charitable Trust in March 2000. The organisation was founded on the belief that quality education is the undeniable right of every child. It was conceived as a tripartite partnership between the Government, the private sector and the voluntary sector.

On one hand, Bangalore was on the cusp of becoming the next Silicon Valley as Y2K rolled in. The irony, on the other hand, was that enrollment in government schools had dropped drastically. Something needed to be done about this issue before it spiralled out of control. It was then that the Karnataka State Education Department took the initiative to rope in NGOs to tackle this problem. Upendra Tripathy, an IAS officer(the then Commissioner for Public Instruction) played a critical role in the evolution of this unique Public-Private Partnership with equal participation and investment from the Foundation itself, Karnataka State Government, and the local donor community in Bangalore. Subsequently, it was one of the finest officers, Ajay Seth, State Education Secretary who helped this model scale.

Also Read - Augmenting strategic ties

Over the years, Akshara has developed its identity, credibility and vision. In 2003-04, Ashok Kamath, a very successful corporate professional, decided to leave it all behind and give back to society. He joined Akshara as the Managing Trustee and became the Chairman in 2008, after Rohini Nilekani its first Chairperson. Akshara has gone to great heights and scale under his able leadership.

Since its inception in 2000, Akshara has run multiple programmes ('Akshara Ganitha' for Math; 'Swalpa English Thumba Fun' for the English language; 'Prepare not Repair' for Preschool Education; 'The Classroom Library') that are designed to be comprehensive, scalable, replicable and cost-effective. The Foundation has always believed that for a programme to be successful, it must be scalable. And all efforts have always been designed with this in mind.

Also Read - Will the imbroglio end?

After three years of evaluation, the unambiguous success of the Akshara Ganitha programme resulted in it being adopted by the Karnataka State Government as the in-class programme for mathematics for grades 4-5. Phase 1 in the scaling up saw it being implemented in the six districts of the Hyderabad Karnataka Region (about 7,600 schools). This was quickly followed by adding six districts, and now every government primary school in every district in Karnataka uses this programme which has been christened 'Ganitha Kalika Andolana' (GKA). In 2017-18, officers of Odisha Government, led by visionary Education Secretary, Ranjana Chopra this programme in action in Bangalore and wanted to replicate it in Odisha. Within a short span, the programme has scaled to cover all schools in two districts and from 2020-21 the infrastructure in the form of kits and teacher training has been created to extend this to all schools in Odisha. In 2018, Andhra Pradesh replicated this programme as Ganitha Mitra and this is now implemented across 5,500 schools in Andhra Pradesh. The programme now impacts over 3 million children across the three states.

Also Read - Full of prospects

Across three states, the government has been the anchor for GKA with consistent and strong support from Akshara Foundation and the local communities. The three state governments have also invested significant amounts in procuring teaching/learning material (TLM) kits (the procurement was done through a competitive bidding process — it is also essential to note that Akshara does not sell any kits to anyone — we encourage smaller companies to build the quality product), teacher training, etc. Several companies have supported Akshara to manage this activity by having field support across the districts and to continuously innovate and come up with better solutions that can be quickly adopted into the GKA model.

Since 2017, Akshara has been making investments in creating digital versions of its classroom products. The design for this was specifically targeted to low-end Android phones, did not depend on continuous Internet connections and was linked to the National Curriculum Framework. Moreover, this was a free product and available in nine languages. This is 'Building Blocks' — and over the past couple of years, there have been more than 350,000 downloads and since each download can support up to six children (using an avatar concept), potentially this has reached to over a million children. In 2019, Building Blocks was unbundled and made available as individual 'gamelets' on state Diksha platforms and linked to energised textbooks using QR codes.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to impact multiple facets of education, especially in government schools. Experts fear that once the schools reopen, the gains of universal enrolment through the Right to Education Act will be lost as an estimated 8-22 per cent of children may drop out due to poverty and displacements.

Governments are faced with the double challenge of a) physical training of teachers where social distancing will be an issue and b) keeping children engaged and learning with schools likely to remain closed until the situation gets better.

However, at Akshara, this was seen as an opportunity for a better tomorrow. There is one important feature that has been absent or at the most, very low key in the government school front — Digital Infrastructure. Much of India's 'ed-tech' sector has been restricted to innovations for urban schools with fee-paying capacity and irrelevant for state-run schools with basic infrastructure challenges. These infrastructure problems need unique disruptions and not just incremental efforts to make them affordable and accessible to children studying in government schools.

With the uncertainty of reopening of government schools, this year Akshara is shifting focus from classroom-based intervention to technology-based support for teachers and children.

The phenomenal success of Akshara presents yet another example of Nexus of Good wherein good practices are being scaled through a public-private partnership. Such initiatives prove that 'good' can be done as it is being done and it can be scaled as well.