Towards Systemic Change

Akshara Foundation was founded on the belief that quality education is the undeniable right of every child and that children should not be deprived of it just because they do not have access to resources that can help them realise their dreams.

words // **Lakshmi Mohan**

Raghu Malappa Maghi could not remember a time when learning had come easily. Yet, there he was, a champion, at a *Gram Panchayat* Mathematics contest catalysed by Akshara Foundation—a class 4 student at a government school in Chikkakoliga village in Karnataka. The moment was triumphant and the prize in his hand priceless. Till the other day, he confronted severe learning difficulties. His parents, low-income agricultural labourers, were desperate for hope so they pulled him out of his private school and put him into their village school as a last-ditch attempt. His teachers set to work on Raghu. They helped him improve his English language skills, then took Akshara Foundation's Ganitha Kalika Andolana (GKA) Mathematics kit with over 20 teaching learning materials (TLMs) and broadened his understanding of numbers. Its play-and-learn method and the activities enabled a deeper understanding of concepts, and though he soon became fluent in English, today Mathematics is his shining skill set.

EDUCATION PROGRAMMES
In the 19 years that Akshara has been working in education, its programmes have brought about many such transformations across the landscape of Karnataka. Almost a million children have been impacted. 'Every Child in School and Learning Well' is its mission, which it implements in partnership with the government. Language and numerical literacy are cornerstones of Akshara's work and scalability, sustainability, replicability and collaboration with the government are strengths.

GANITHA KALIKA ANDOLANA
GKA is a flagship initiative that state governments implement under their oversight in 12,065 government primary schools in 12 districts in Karnataka; 4,200 schools in two districts in Odisha; and 2,000 model schools in 13 districts in Andhra Pradesh. In Karnataka, it targets IV and V standards, while in the other states, GKA is implemented from classes I to V.

Every programme that Akshara designs is based on heavy research and in this case, the data for Mathematics reflects the dismal learning levels in government schools. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), in its 2016 survey, said that 20.2% of standard III children in government schools could do simple subtraction and that 21.1% of standard V children could do simple division. Akshara factored this into GKA's design formula.

GKA acts as support and supplement in the classroom to promote Mathematical literacy. It creates a space for Mathematics in class beyond the textbook and blackboard, clears the 'fear of failure' that children labour under, and introduces fun-filled, activity-oriented changes to the way maths is taught. The learning material is durable, child-friendly and meshes well

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Gram Panchayats, some in remote hinterlands, who have conducted Mathematics contests in which over 3,00,000 children have participated.

Government of Karnataka rolled out GKA in 2015-16 on an experimental footing in six districts. Akshara supplied the kits and trained teachers and education officials in GKA's methodology. Phase 2 was a gradual expansion into a few more districts. Owing to the success of the initial two phases, the government has now announced Phase 3 of the initiative. In 2019-20, GKA will reach all of Karnataka, covering approximately 31,000 government primary schools and 7,00,000 children.

A MODEL THAT WORKS
It can be said that Mathematical literacy is truly underway and that GKA has become a self-driving movement, with active support from the Akshara Foundation. There's a school in Chamarajanagar, a remote area in Karnataka. The last part of the way is a trek of 7km through partly forested land with, on occasion, an elephant or two around. The school has one teacher and many students. Says Ashok Kamath, Chairman, Akshara Foundation, "Take this teacher. We're making her life easier in class with GKA, with training and assessments. We've given some powerful tools to teachers and children. We train and build a large amount of capacity inside the system. When it all aggregates, we have a powerful story to tell. GKA has been an incredible journey and it will continue. For me, this programme would be successful when Akshara has no presence in the field, but GKA is still running."

Akshara uses innovative visual aids to explain Mathematical concepts to students

with the Mathematical goals of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, and the class syllabus.

EXPANSION PLANS
The spin-offs to stakeholders from three years of GKA activity in Karnataka are many. Over 17,000 teachers now teach Mathematics using activity-based methods. GKA teams have made more than 2,00,000 household visits to make parents aware of their children's learning levels. The most significant impact is that GKA has brought into the schooling ecosystem the support and enthusiasm of most local

TIMELINE

2004 'School Library Programme' initiated to make every student in government primary schools the member of a library

2006 'Remedial Reading Programme' started in Bengaluru to improve English literacy

2007 'Remedial Math Programme' started in Bengaluru to improve Math skills

2010 'Akshara Ganitha Programme' to make Math more fun rolled out in Bengaluru's primary government schools

2011 'Swalpa English Thumba Fan initiative' launched to improve spoken English competency among primary school students

2014 'Ganitha Kalika Andolana' launched in collaboration with Karnataka government to expand the Math programme to all primary school students over the next few years