Editorial

It’s been Five Years

The world over, development agencies and governments, desperate for workable solutions to problems of unequal access to public services, such as education, have taken to promoting public private partnerships (PPPs).

In India, the PPP model has developed more as an extension of philanthropy or CSR initiatives. Corporations or non-profits/NGOs are allowed access to public agencies to partner in the creation of improved services essentially through their own funding. Is this the right way forward? It does no harm, of course, and certainly does some good but it is not sustainable as a model. The urgent need is to stretch the value of the government rupee to fulfill the development mandate.

A true public-private partnership uses expertise, technology and management practices of the private sector, but uses public finance to ensure universal access to the most desperately poor people. For the past five years, at Akshara Foundation, Bangalore, I truly believe we have demonstrated a successful example of this PPP model.

At the heart of Akshara’s vision of “Every child in school and learning well” has been the faith that when government, corporations, and communities come together, powerful synergies are built.

In March 2000, Akshara was set up because the then Commissioner, Public Instruction, proactively believed in the Pratham model on which it was based. Almost immediately, many city corporate leaders came forward to back the initiative. A handful of concerned individuals made a powerful team that fanned out into the slums of Bangalore, pushing the idea of communities in charge of their children’s education.

The idea caught on like wildfire, overwhelming us all. Within a couple of months, we had been able to recruit 200 volunteers, whom we called education ambassadors who systematically went from area to area, setting up preschools (balwadis) and remedial/tuition programmes. There was no looking back. As you will see in the rest of this fifth anniversary special issue, we devised many programmes based on actual needs on the ground. The Akshara family of volunteers grew to 1000 and our children to 100,000. Government gave us access to its resources, not just in terms of space but also people. Generous individuals and corporations continued to support us financially. More and more professionals joined our initial rag tag team of enthusiasts, bringing in managerial talent and technology initiatives.

Yet, the money we raised has not been used to create new infrastructure in schools or to supplant public spending. In fact, we have used the approximately Rs. 4 crores we have spent in the past five years to leverage public money and improve government services. Or we have used it to create effective community networks that improve the quality of demand on public services. We have painstakingly built a platform for cooperative action and advocacy. Akshara funds have gone into libraries and computers in schools and in communities, new material for learning, balwadis that improve enrollment in school, interventions that bring back out of school children into the public school network. The PROOF project hopes to create a sustainable model for high performance in corporation schools. And so on. Why did we not just choose the easier path of either creating islands of excellence by adopting a few schools? Because we firmly believe that in order to universalize quality elementary education, we need to address core issues of governance and scale.

This can only be achieved by taking a systemic approach inside government. Luckily for us, the Karnataka Government and the Bangalore Mahanagara Palike have been most cooperative and open-minded. Together, we can be truly proud of our achievements.

Rohini Nilekani
Chairperson, Akshara Foundation
5 Things we believe in

♫ That QUALITY elementary education should be made accessible to every child.
♫ That for universalisation of quality elementary education, we need to build strong partnerships with the government, the voluntary sector, citizens from different communities, and the corporate sector.
♫ That we need to address issues of governance to improve the delivery of public services, such as education, by working with and within the system.
♫ That for programmes to be effective, they need to be simple to implement, scalable, replicable, and geographically comprehensive.
♫ That the ultimate goal is to develop self-sustaining models that are community driven, making all of us catalysts of change.

5 Successful Programmes

♫ The Balwadi Programme for pre-schoolers that has made early learning possible for over 52,000 little ones.
♫ The Accelerated Reading Programme that has taught over 17,000 children to read well.
♫ The Library Programme that has got over 6,000 enthusiastic children hooked onto the world of reading.
♫ The Community Outreach Programme that is working hard to engage in flexible learning with hundreds of out of school children to ensure that they get the basic education they need.
♫ The PROOF model that uses performance indicators to bring accountability at all levels in the school system and greatly enhances the value of the service delivery.

5 Things that make us Proud

♫ In a mere five years, we have touched the lives of no less than 100,000 children in and around Bangalore.
♫ Of the 52,000 pre-school children that we have worked with, over 95% have gone on to enroll in formal education.
♫ Our Accelerated Learning Programmes have improved the learning ability of nearly 20,000 children.
♫ We have provided over 6000 children with access to books and computers.
♫ By becoming ambassadors of education we have empowered over 5,000 women from the community.
5 Things that Touch Our Hearts

😊 The shy smile on a 4 year old’s face when the Balwadi teacher calls out her name.
😊 The proud lilt in the voice of an 8 year old showing off that she can read now.
😊 The confidence shining from the face of a 19 year old volunteer who walks into work.
😊 The precious donations of Rs.100 up from strangers who have faith in us.
😊 The daily evidence that EVERY CHILD CAN AND WILL LEARN.

5 Things We Wish We Could Change

✔ The apathy of the general public to the vital issue of universal education.
✔ The huge difference between elite schools and government schools.
✔ The low levels of motivation among teachers.
✔ The lack of faith in the relevance of continued education among the poor.
✔ The lack of creativity and flexibility in the exam oriented curriculum.

5 Partners We Would Like To Thank

❖ Every single person in government who has worked with us.
❖ Every single volunteer who has believed in equal access to good schooling.
❖ Every single donor.
❖ Every journalist who has reported on our work.
❖ Every child who has allowed us into her life.

5 Years From Now

c To see our mission of “Every Child in School and Learning Well” become a reality.

C To see that every child has access to convenient pre school.

C To see a quality initiative like PROOF in each school.

C To see pro active planning for new schools and infrastructure.

C To see relevant and vibrant curriculum for elementary schools with a clear direction for secondary and vocational schooling.
5 Messages of Support

“Akshara Foundation has done exceedingly well in the sphere of education. Their programmes have been extremely useful and will help resolve community and national issues.”

Mr. Dinesh Gundurao, Hon. MLA, Gandhinagar Assembly Constituency.

“We are proud to have Akshara Foundation as our community programme partner in Bangalore. Through a span of three years, this partnership has grown with ease impacting some key aspects...our learnings from the wealth of experience that Akshara brings to the table and the confidence they inspire has increased financial support from Citigroup Foundation. The Akshara Foundation partnership serves as an example of best practices within Citigroup for efforts in the area of ‘educating the next generation’ especially for the less privileged.”

Madhulika Gupta, VP and Director, Corporate Affairs, Citibank NA

“The Accelerated Reading Programme of Akshara Foundation has definitely helped the children in 117 government schools to learn well. This has led to increased competency in reading in the medium of instruction. The extension of Akshara Foundation’s activities in 33 backward Education Blocks is a welcome move.”

D. Rajkumar Khatri, IAS, State Project Director, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan

“The work that Akshara Foundation is doing is good for children and their families. For every one child that gets educated, the quality of life of a family improves. Congratulations to Akshara Foundation and may it carry on the good work.”

Waheeda Rehman, Actress and supporter of universal primary education.

“We had apprehensions that an organization like Akshara with multiple projects would not give enough attention and time to our partnership. To our pleasant surprise, we found Akshara to be a very nimble and approachable organization. We were also extremely impressed with the team at the grassroots level. We feel that every person associated with Akshara is truly committed to the cause of child education.”

Umesh Malhotra, Trustee, Hippocampus Reading Foundation.

5 Children have their say ......

Suhas
Std II, Govt. Kannada Lower Primary School, Heggenhalli (N1 Block)

“Reading is one of my passions. I was introduced to reading as a fun pastime by my sister, Sowmya. My parents, Mr Nagaraj and Mrs Nagamani encourage both my sister and me to borrow books from the Akshara Library. I have borrowed over 30 books over the last four months. My favourite is the Read India book ‘Murida Rekke’ (The Broken Wing). I am so happy Akshara is setting up libraries everywhere.”

Sara Fathima
Std IV, K B Sandra, GULPS

“Last year, I was in Std III, and was attending JJP classes. I liked all the flashcards very much. Through flash cards, it is easy to join letters and make words. I would like to continue studying in JJP class, with Akhila Miss. I would like to go to her class even in the holidays. I also like the maths exercises very much.”

M S Dhanraj
BLS High School, H Malligere, Mandya Taluk

“Enrolling as a member of Ms Sujatha’s library since the 11th of November 2004 has been an enriching experience in many ways. A large part of my spare time was formerly spent in playing. Now I read a number of books from the library and refer to the dictionary at the library reading centre when I encounter difficult words. Dinakkondu Kathe (A Story A Day) and Scientific Discoveries are two of my favourite books.”
Every Child in School & Learning Well

Nayara Begum,
who runs a Balwadi in Gurappanapalya

“When I started the independent Balwadi centre two and a half years ago, I got a lot of help, materials and training from Akshara. I started with 10 children at my centre and one session a day. Now I have two sessions a day, an assistant, and 61 children at my centre. All the parents of the children in my balwadi give me full support. I am able to support my family financially and feel very empowered.”

B. S. Parvathamma
Teacher, Govt. Kannada Higher Primary School Morenahalli, Bangalore.

“In my experience, the story flash cards that we use in the Reading Programme are responsible for the sudden drop in truancy among the children that I teach. Which child would not want to come to school when school means a new story every day for 45 days, all involving animals, with bright colourful pictures, and with the words and letters written in bold, easy-to-read script?”

Shashikala
Mother of Five year old Anush Kumar, who attends the Akshara Balwadi at Mallattahalli, Bangalore

“Both my husband and I love sending our son Anush Kumar to the Akshara Balwadi. Here, learning and teaching is through play, which keeps the child interested and eager to go to school. Anush has just turned five. But he can already write from A to Z, and from 1 to 10. He can sing songs and tell stories. He can identify a large number of animals, birds, fruits, vegetables, colours, shapes, and musical instruments. I wish every child would get an opportunity to learn at an Akshara Balwadi.”

Kamala
Mother of Meghana, a Class IV student LM Palya, Bangalore

“My daughter Meghana did not even know how to read Kannada letters three years ago. At that time, an Akshara volunteer came to teach at our local government school as part of the ‘Odhona Banni’ Programme (Accelerated Reading Programme). Now my daughter reads so well that she is the one who reads the daily newspaper out to us! I am very happy and satisfied with her progress.”

Roohinaz
Akshara Volunteer

“I have just completed five years as an Akshara volunteer. I joined as a Balwadi teacher but soon began to teach Bridge Courses (for mainstreaming out of school children). After the first Bridge Course, I managed to get all twenty children in my course admitted into the government school and won the Rs. 5000 prize from Akshara. Apart from teaching skills, I have acquired several new skills like working in teams, leadership, training, community communication, and so on. In 2002, I got the prize for the Best Work in the field of Education from my peers. I used to be scared and under confident five years ago, but Akshara has given me my identity, and I am very grateful for that.”

5 People Who Believe

Suganthi
Std V, Jogupalya Corporation School

"I attended AMP program conducted by Manjushree Miss last year. She taught us maths in a very easy manner. Now I really like to do arithmetic. I don’t like to miss school ever. I wish the Akshara Miss will continue to teach us."

Reshma
Std V, Gajendeshari Swamyn School, Kamalanagar (N1 Block)

"I come from an Urdu speaking background. But I am reading and speaking Kannada fluently now. I was encouraged to start learning to read Kannada because of all the lovely books that were available at Shantamma’s mobile library, of which I am a member. I have now completed reading 50 books. My favourite books are Navilugariya Aa Kannu (Eyes on the Peacock’s Tail), and Mayada Pathre (The Magic Vessel)."
All along, we at Akshara have had an immense belief in *Every Child in School and Learning Well*. Lots has been accomplished but as the poet Robert Frost says

“But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep”

Where do we see ourselves five years from today? We find the answers in our Vision itself:

**Every** : the Oxford Dictionary of English defines “every” as “a singular noun to refer to all the individual members of a set without exception” – what this means is that while we have impacted the lives of about 100,000 children in Bangalore and Hubli / Dharwad, we still have a large number of children in urban settings in our state and more beyond. Let us not ration our education but focus on getting every one of our children into school. All of us who understand the importance of education; all of us who believe in our Constitution and all of us who have been elected to uphold that Constitution and hold dear all that it embodies – all of us should do our best to ensure that *Every* child is educated.  

*And, Akshara will be at the forefront pushing for this.*

**Child**: In our educational system a child in primary school is typically till the age of 13 years (7th Standard). A child in the pre-school age group needs to be prepared to go to formal school and this is a barrier that has to be quickly addressed. How can a child who is a first generation school-goer become prepared in her home environment? How can a parent who has never been to school prepare her? This has never been a focus in the government system in the past 50 years – let’s make it a focus NOW. *And, Akshara will be at the forefront pushing for this.*

**School**: The school system has its flaws and has to be made relevant to the needs of our children who will live in the 21st century. This means that we have to re-design the existing schools to deliver the best for our children. The PROOF in Education programme has shown that “What gets measured gets done” works and this will allow us to plan the best for the schools system. Scaling this programme across all schools in our state should be the goal *And, Akshara will be at the forefront pushing for it.*

**Learning Well**: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, in mid-March 2005, mentioned that the drop-out rate in India was as high as nearly 53%. This means that our system believes that either the children cannot learn or we think that they are not worth teaching. We at Akshara believe that the first premise is factually wrong while the second premise is morally wrong. Children in the government school system should have the opportunity to Learn Well and this means that teachers have a responsibility and society should give them (the teachers) the respect and recognition they deserve so that they can produce the best-educated children in the world; this means that language and math skills have to be honed and perfected and children should learn them in a joyful way; this means that children should read and learn and libraries are a great place to keep this habit going. *And, Akshara will be at the forefront pushing for all of it.*

Let us set high standards for our children; let us involve teachers, educators, parents and the community at large in the process of education; let us publicly disclose data on our school systems – all to the common goal of seeing every child has a chance to lead a life of accomplishment and not one of frustration.

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*We value your feedback*

Please contact us at :  
Akshara Foundation,  
9, Charles Campbell Road, Cox Town,  
Bangalore – 560 005.  
Ph: +91 80 2580 1462 / 63  
Email: info@aksharafoundation.org  
[www.aksharafoundation.org](http://www.aksharafoundation.org)

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