

From Illiteracy to Literacy: Change One Word and You Change Everything

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- "Statistics they say don't bleed:" An estimated 350 million Indians cannot read or write."
- "50 million children across India are out of school, and that is a conservative estimate."
- Can campaigns make a critical difference and result in social action?
- What is the link between access and participation?
- How can we sustain social change?



These were some of the issues that took centre stage in Madhyam's communication campaign for 100% Enrollment of Children in Schools. WACC is supporting this project.

At the end of the campaign phase we had some answers and many questions, but if there was one cross cutting component which emerged it was – in a few words - inclusiveness, and the effectiveness of communications building communities.

Today in India there is a frenetic urgency- a missionary zeal building up into a movement on the Right to Education for every child especially in the light of the recent Bill passed in Parliament which has made education for every child free and compulsory from the age of 6-14 years in India. Madhyam decided to scale up its efforts and leverage its influence by partnering with many stakeholders- the government – Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and APSA - (Association for the Promotion of Social Action) a rights-based child-centred community development organisation. Our outreach/associate partners included the Azim Premji Foundation and a corporate house, Mphasis, and Eurokids, a mainstream nursery school network.

The 100% Enrollment Campaign as it was called, had a focussed one point agenda to cut the supply of child labour by ensuring that every child is in school and learning. Strategically, we use both community media as well as some forms of mainstream media to curtail both the demand and supply of child labour. For instance our community media strategy included social marketing, street theatre, wall painting, door to door campaigning where we exhorted parents to put their children into schools thereby cutting the supply of child labour. On the demand side, bus hoardings, talk shows on radio, public service advertisements, articles in the press were strongly used to inform the public about the recently instituted law which made child labour a crime. "Any person found guilty of employing a child in their home or establishment would be liable to two years in prison and a fine of Rs 20000" screamed the media.

Typical campaign days were spent thus: the first day in a slum would entail enlisting the "buy-in" of enthusiastic groups, community leaders and self-help groups formed by APSA. The main campaign day began at about noon with much fanfare. A branded autorickshaw playing our cassette sung by children about the rights of the child blares through the by-lanes of the slum drawing people out of their homes like an electronic piper.

Children eagerly flock around with outstretched arms and proudly sport their sunshades proclaiming the message of “Education Empowers” in Kannada, Urdu and Tamil. Our volunteers refer to their survey list of ‘push-outs” or “drop-outs” or children who have never been to school before. They visit their homes pasting identification stickers which facilitate a smooth implementation of the door to door campaign. The local slum school authority and some of the youth and women’s groups swing into action seconding our efforts in helping to convince parents to enroll their children. Arguments fly thick and fast but our volunteers parry and field arguments with great skill. The most difficult one is about “opportunity cost”. Parents question the impending loss of immediate income the child is bringing to a family vis-a-vis supposed long term gains. ‘Can you guarantee a job after a 10th std education” they question. Fortunately APSA have vocational education, computer education and an open system of learning which expedites the completion of Std 10 in one year. Learning the English language is a “carrot” they just can’t resist. They see it as a passport to their future, and rightly so.



We then continue our social marketing – distributing calendars, invite the families for the Madhyam – APSA street play which maintains a wonderful balance between the comic and the serious, on the importance of education. The play ends with a reminder of the anti-child labour law, the introduction of the slum school teacher, and the other avenues open for learning. We exit from the slum, but we leave behind reminder messages on the walls , stickers and a daily reminder through the calendar. And after ensuring that follow up seeds of ownership have been firmly planted in the

local community.

In our 40 day campaign we enrolled 1052 children into 28 schools. The challenge however remains - retention is an issue because the dropout rate is alarming - 42% for Std 1-4, and 58% for Std 1-8 . Unless we address this in the second phase of our campaign all our efforts will be like filling water in a broken earthenware pot.