

Lifting Children Out Of Poverty Without Winning a Game Show

TEDx Talk, April 2010, Rutgers University

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Relationship To Theme "Connecting the Unconnected". This talk is about a new idea for educating India's vast underclass and connecting it to the mainstream.

India is now an economic, military and space powerhouse. Yet, there is a vast underclass that is largely unconnected with the mainstream. You have likely seen *Slumdog Millionaire* which is the story of a boy who is lifted out of poverty by correctly answering 15 questions. But what is the probability of pulling this off for the 135 million children in the slums of India and similar numbers in other parts of the world? Let me tell you of about an organization called Pratham that vastly increases this probability. Its uniqueness lies in concurrently addressing not just the educational but also a socio-economic problem. One of its strategies is to reach out to women in the slums. In the normal course, the younger women would marry at a very early age and produce more illiterate children. Pratham trains them to become teachers. This improves their status in society and makes them financially empowered enough to postpone marriage by many years. But perhaps most importantly, they have the credibility to convince parents of slum children to invest in their education. They run the schools in the slums itself. This inside-out approach has worked very well and Pratham claim to have educated about a million children in the past 16 years.

To obtain a sense of how well this idea works, in August 2006, my son Chetan Narain and I visited the slums of Delhi every day for a month. Our goal was to get an intuitive feel for the children, their friends, their parents, their teachers, and the communities they live in. The slums are a world that is largely disconnected from that of middle and upper class Indians. Let me share with you how that world unfolded in front of us.

One slum we visited is called Zakhira. Zakhira means mineral in Urdu. The reason will become clear in a moment. It can only be accessed by crossing railroad tracks on which locomotives such as this one run. Children are sometimes killed by such locomotives but their parents are scared to report these accidents to the police for fear that they may be arrested for negligence and maybe have their other children taken away. A lot of people work in these mineral pits excavating minerals for small amounts of money. The kids work alongside their parents in these pits, but also find time to fly kite and just hang around. There is no running drinking water. It has to be collected in canisters and brought home every day. Of course, there is no drainage. People here are preoccupied with daily survival. Education of their children takes a backseat even if they feel the need for it.

One of the children we met was a 13 year-old girl called Gulbakawli, one of 9 children. She makes these colored bangles that she sells to supplement her family income. Her mother sews quilts and sells each for 100 rupees or \$2. We were pleasantly surprised to meet her great-grand father, who was then 105

years old. Yet, he was mentally alert, in good spirits and very talkative. We asked him what was the secret of his long life. He said he fed on good character. They all live in a two room accommodation.

Yet, he didn't much care for education. It took a lady in the slums called Zeenat. She was instrumental in having Gulbakawali attend school along with one of her friends, Asma. Her parents were initially reluctant but Zeenat coaxed them into trying school and assured them that she would leave enough time for them to work and supplement family income. Eventually, she succeeded in having all but one of Gulbakawali's siblings attend school.

Classes are run in the slums wherever possible. This is one of the overcrowded classrooms run by the city of Delhi. This one has 70 children. The teacher there said that the English curriculum is of an impossibly high standard so about 70% of the students fail. If they are not advanced to the next class, they exacerbate the overcrowding.

And so the teachers work, in the oppressive Delhi heat, but still maintain good humor. But their labors reap rich rewards. One was a piece of brilliance in a class room. There is an Aesop's fable about a crow on a hot summer day who finds a pitcher of water but the water level is nearly at the bottom. He drops one pebble at a time till the level rises and he can dip his beak into the water. But, this kid said that that solution was so 20th century. The new solution is that the crow just used a straw.

Then, there is this boy having an out of body experience hearing a story being told by a teacher.

Then, there are the proud mothers beaming at their children, and this mom and this mom.

But, perhaps the richest reward is to make a little girl smile like this.

Well just last week I found out that Gulbakawali and Asma are in 11th grade. So, I guess they have escaped the downward spiral of poverty leading to illiteracy.

Finally, we thank Dr. Chitra Raghavan, Mr. Bharat Patni, Rekha, Zeenat and Tasleem Bano all of Pratham for arranging for our amazing experience.

Notes

1. This talk is based on a 2006 Pratham Internship report [Hope Amidst Despair](#) by Chetan Narain.
2. The TEDx video is available [here](#) and photographs [here](#).
3. In 2011, Akshar Narain did a follow-on internship tracking the same children and wrote a report [Hope Sustained: Five Years Later](#).