Inspiring slum children through education: a story from Delhi

Geeta Dharmarajan, Executive Director, Katha, India

In a personal account of the 22 years since she set up Katha (which means ‘story’ in most Indian languages), Geeta Dharmarajan reflects on how education services can inspire children and women from urban slum environments to become active in improving their communities. The article explains how Katha’s model of classroom education combined with community-focused projects teaches children to think for themselves and contribute to strengthening their society, and looks at how Katha’s work with government to take their ideas to scale could provide a model for India’s rapidly-urbanising society. (www.katha.org)

In April 2010 we brought together leading thinkers from government, academia and the nonprofit world at a workshop to discuss ‘The Child and the Megacity’ – a look at the impact of slum environments in Delhi on the lives and education of children. The issue will become more and more important. From 18 million today, the population of Delhi is predicted to rise to between 21 million and 26 million by 2030. Across India, by 2030 an estimated 590 million people - nearly twice the current population of the USA - will be living in cities.

According to a report by McKinsey¹, approximately 170 million of 2030’s urban Indians will be tomorrow’s pre-/primary schoolers – and yet we are not investing nearly enough in those children today. Even the Right to Education Act² that India has finally enacted gives only a sideward glance at early learners. Things are changing, though, and we hope that our engagements in Delhi today can show the way for other metropolises in India.

First we need to tell the story of how our organisation evolved from its original aims to our present plans. Katha is an organisation based around the idea of ‘story’, we started in 1988 with the mission to enhance the joy of reading, through a health and environment magazine for first generation school-goers. But soon we realised we were putting the cart before the horse. Didn’t children and women first have to know how to read before they could walk the road out of poverty to self-reliance?

Our first creche and school for slum children

On September 8, 1989, by fortunate chance also World Literacy Day, Katha was registered as a nonprofit striving to make a difference in the literacy to literature continuum. I still remember my first visit to Govindpuri, one of the largest slum clusters in Delhi. Govindpuri already had thousands of families, about 50% Hindu, 50% Muslim. Families had many children; most of them didn’t go to school. When I asked, mothers said, “Yes, we want...
our children to go to school, but they have to support the family”.

At that time, many of our mothers were bravely managing their families, single-handedly, with 7-14 year olds helping out. I saw girls with little siblings tucked into their hips, often almost as big as they themselves. Four year olds were working - though to be fair, their mothers thought they were sending their toddlers to 'schools' that provided lunch.

The main culprit? Poverty. When they migrated to Delhi for work, these families settled in the most neglected spaces - degraded land infested with mosquitoes and flies with no drainage or water, electricity or garbage disposal. They could not afford anywhere else. This, for them, was one way of being invisible, of not being evicted.

So started the Khazana Experiment, our ‘deschool’ that would also strive to make the environments of children living in urban slums a little better, with a little less violence, a little more hygiene.

By November 1990, we had five precious children and five 10x10 foot rooms given by the Delhi Government’s Slum Wing. I wanted schools that were fun for little children who seemed more at ease handling a hammer than a pencil. The children came - with their baby sisters and brothers. Within a month, we'd started a crèche. Soon we had 25 babies in it, and as many children in our classrooms.

Shifting the focus onto income generation for mothers

Yet, as the months rolled by, more children were difficult to come by. When daily living and staving off hunger were their top priorities, how could mothers think school? What moral right had we to speak of long term goals and futures that were nowhere in their reckoning? We decided to coax and induce mothers into income generation activities, so that once we had increased the incomes of women we could more reasonably ask them to send their children to school.

By the end of 1991, Katha Shakti was helping women to own and nurture their own economic freedoms and thoughts on empowerment. Since then, 90,500 women have come into Katha and moved on, carrying with them the need to fight for their rights, the need to dream, to see a different future for their children, to stand tall on their own two feet. With our Income Generation Programme (IGP) training they were bringing themselves out of poverty.

The early 1990s were heady days. Children and women were walking into our school, eager to learn, curious about everything and everyone. And the question looming over us all: our children seemed perfectly happy, and impervious to their poor physical living conditions, so how could we help them become agents of change, leaders in their community? How do we persuade first generation learners coming from oral traditions, into reading and 'formal education'? How do we increase performance, attendance and retention in children who were more used to learning through hearing than through reading? There were no easy answers. Every wheel had to be invented.

The Katha education system is not so much teaching a child as finding the seed of potential, nurturing this spark and giving each child space to grow.
individuals, as a society, if we do not all have a level playing field?

**Devising a relevant curriculum for urban slum children**

The Katha Pre-school Curriculum, the *Katha Bal Taleem*, addresses these very issues, uniquely designed for early learners living in urban slums. So too our teacher education curriculum. I had started learning classical dance when I was 7, and all the succeeding years of deep learnings from Bharata’s *Natyashastra*, India’s 2000-year old treatise on dance and drama, influenced Katha’s thinking on pedagogy, teacher training and communication to a largely non-literate population about SHE: ‘Safe water and Sanitation. Heath and Hygiene. Education and Empowerment.’

Theories and state-designed curricula got examined and a new ideology was put in place that would help children stay in school. By 1992, we had our relevant education curriculum that was based on caring and sharing, and brought the community into the classroom. Teachers had to write a paper on ‘The teacher as the centre of community action’ to get their Katha diplomas. Our children now proudly say that they’re “Dreamers-Doers”.

I remember that by 1995, children were talking of the importance of safe drinking water. They were able to see when water was ‘dirty’ and advise their families on simple ways of purifying them, like putting out bottles of water in the sun for a few hours. By 2001, we had expanded the IT programme with the support of the UK’s BT and Intel. Science classes were focused on issues like water and sanitation. Social studies was learnt by a complete social mapping exercise of the community, with students doing a door to door survey and recording data on their computers. And when I had the ambitious plan of getting a geographic information system (GIS) map for Govindpuri, and found it too expensive, it was classwork that came up with a solution. Our students went *gali*5 by *gali*, measuring literally foot by foot, and drawing a detailed map of their entire area, showing houses, temples, open spaces, and water points. They digitized this in their IT classes to make our own GIS.

One trimester when we were looking at urban conditions, students did a water availability survey, analyzed the data using Excel, and made an impressive presentation showing which pockets were worst affected. On the day Delhi’s Chief Minister, Sheila Dikshit, visited our school, they used this to convince her enough to make a call to the CEO of Delhi Water Board, the DJB. When the DJB people came and threw up their hands for the lack of a map of the area, it was the GIS map made by the children which saved the day – they used it to plan and install 13 new water lines.

When we started we had to get the mothers to bring the children into the school, and now it was our children who were getting their mothers into the school and helping their communities. Education is not just about traditional subject knowledge. It is also about community and starts with their own stories. The SPICE Route to education that Katha follows helps students of all ages understand the Social, Personal, Intellectual, Cultural or Environmental strengths that formal education gives. SPICE helps them plan to bring themselves out of slums through classrooms that interest and challenge them.

**KREAD - the Katha Relevant Education for All Round Development** - weaves history and geography, science and maths, vocational and leadership skills into stories about their own community and lives. Learning by doing – rather than learning to do – is the mantra of any Katha School. How book learning can help students cooperatively find solutions to civic problems, how each child can do her bit to help her family and community. Katha does not use normal textbooks in class, but storybooks and material from the internet, newspapers, magazines and students’ own experiences. Teachers develop materials to make learning joyful, relevant and creative, increasing lifelong learning skills and habits in children. Our children work on a number of projects, many with special relevance to their community, depending on the theme adopted for each trimester.
Going to scale with quality learning in urban environments

We were always acutely aware, however, that our work was reaching only a small fraction of Delhi’s children. About 9 million (nearly 50% of Delhi’s population) live in slums. Nearly 1 million children just in the 0-4 age group live in this urban squalor and poverty. We knew we had to go to scale. One of our first attempts to do so was the Schools on Wheels, inspired by a 2001 study on street children who worked rather than going to school. Thanks to a USAID grant in 2004 and EU funding, by 2007 we were working with communities in 50 slums to set up early learning centres. Dialogues with Government went from small to big where our women engaged directly with the Chief Minister and asked for essentials like primary health centres and pre-schools.

In 2008, in a first of its kind, the Delhi Government entered into an agreement with us to introduce the Katha tested reading pedagogy into government and municipal schools, to get children to read for fun and at grade level. And through reading we were able to discuss a variety of issues with children - hygiene, school and domestic violence, as well as their own dreams for their future. Our evaluations show significant improvement in performance, attendance and retention.

Building on this success, we are now engaged more intensely in these 50 municipal schools in a school improvement programme focusing on grades 1 to 3. UNICEF, UNESCO, the Bernard van Leer Foundation and other partners support the programme - our teacher support plan and the unique zero (compressed pre-school) module.

But there is still a long way to go. A 2009 baseline survey by Katha in 74 slums, as part of our study for the Foundation on the pre-school to primary education link, showed that out of 253,000 children aged 4 to 14, a full 95,000 were not in school. With roughly 800 children/school, that means we would need some 120 schools. But such a large number of schools with buildings and teachers can be done only by the government or the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, MCD. And this is in only 74 of Delhi’s slums. Imagine the challenge if we project this onto 1700 slums with thousands of at risk children. If we want a good future for our children, civil society must join hands with government.

In India we have lobbies for various issues, but none for early learning. In 2009-10 Katha spearheaded civil society discussions on children and poverty issues: Three major conferences with major partners were organized: the ‘Roundtable on the education of 4-8 year olds’ with the National Council for Education Research and Training, NCERT; a national ECE conference with the National University of Educational Planning and Administration; and an International Conference on Social Movements for Women and Children with the University of Delaware, USA. We preceded each of these with community-level consultations,
bringing our youth and women into the last two. The ‘Child and the Megacity’ workshop referred to at the beginning of the article was part of this process, and we continue to deepen engagements with government – in September 2010, the CM asked to visit Katha’s Gender Resource Centre, to listen to our women. A responsive government can indeed make a difference.

Our plans for the future

Today, of the 50 MCD Schools we work in, only about 25 have pre-schools in the premises. And if you count the 50 slums we are working in, then of the 75 or so schools near our communities, not even 50% have pre-schools. We have written to the government for permission to help start pre-schools in every one of the MCD schools, starting with our 50, that we hand over to Government once they are stable. We also plan to establish simple pre-schools at very low cost in each slum that does not have pre-schools: we started 12 in September 2010. Finally, as influencing policy is important, we plan to make sure our young people learn about how to make governments work.

Change comes slowly, but with whole communities involved, a groundswell of demand and informed debate and engagement with policymakers, the bureaucracy, academia and media develops. From 2010 to 2012, with support of the Government of India, we’ve embarked on an ambitious study of poverty, social exclusion and the education continuum, from pre- to high school. A first of its kind, the action-research started in 50 slums to derive a roadmap for Delhi. We’ve begun with consultations at the community level and through a series of workshops/seminars will engage other stakeholders in civil society for building this lobby for quality education for children in slums, including pre-school education. This is Katha’s Education Master Plan, Delhi.

Writing this story has been a contemplative and deeply satisfying journey to find out what of the old we must keep and what of the new we need to bring in when scaling up urban equitable education alongside environments and family wellbeing. But we all know this is the way. Our brave children and women will bring hope, as they always have. And India is lucky to have hundreds of really active and effective NGOs to work with them. And as we together get governments to listen, just imagine the sounds of happiness from millions of children. Surely a call for celebration, that!

Notes
1 India’s urban awakening: Building inclusive cities, sustaining economic growth: India’s lack of effective policies to manage its rapid and large-scale urbanization could jeopardize the nation’s growth trajectory. But if India pursues a new operating model for its cities, it could add as much as 1 to 1.5 percent to annual GDP growth, bringing the economy closer to the double-digit growth to which the government aspires; McKinsey Global Institute, April 2010.
2 The RTE Act enacted by India in 2010, makes education for all children from ages 6-14 free and compulsory.
3 Shakti means power.
4 SHE is a Katha programme for youth and women. Double woman power!
5 Gali: narrow pathway inside a slum.
6 Draft Report can be obtained upon request.
7 MCD is the biggest of the three municipal bodies Delhi has, and governs 1,397 sq. kms, or 94% of the city. MCD runs 1800 primary schools for almost 1.8 million 5-10 year olds. So the way they teach, and look after the physical environments of all these children is important.

India’s urban awakening: Building inclusive cities, sustaining economic growth: India’s lack of effective policies to manage its rapid and large-scale urbanization could jeopardize the nation’s growth trajectory. But if India pursues a new operating model for its cities, it could add as much as 1 to 1.5 percent to annual GDP growth, bringing the economy closer to the double-digit growth to which the government aspires; McKinsey Global Institute, April 2010.