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**Spelling out the illiteracy challenge**

**Charity aims to give basic education to millions in India**

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The fight to solve India's literacy problem is like trying to raise the ocean by a few centimeters. Similar campaigns in other regions are more like filling a bucket by comparison. That was the message delivered in Hong Kong recently.

Madhav Chavan, founder and president of Indian education charity Pratham, was in town to garner support for an ambitious goal - to teach more than 60 million children aged between three and 14 simple math and basic reading and writing skills by next March.

"When half of the world's illiterate people are in one country, it is not India's problem, it's the world's," said Dr Chavan, who addressed audiences at the Foreign Correspondents' Club, the Asia Society, held at the Hong Kong Club, and the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association, where an open forum was co-organized by the Hong Kong Social Entrepreneurship Forum and the Hong Kong Council of Social Service.

"If there is a strike or a conflict in India, everyone notices it because it could affect them," he said. Illiteracy was no less important. "It can turn into an epidemic."

Dr. Chavan, a chemical engineer who trained in the United States in the 1980s, said the aim of Pratham's literacy movement, which began in the slums of Mumbai in 1994, was no less than to change India's future.

With one-sixth of the world's population in India, Dr Chavan put the number of illiterate people in the country at around 280 million.

About 94 per cent of children were enrolled in school, but a Pratham survey carried out in 2005 found that close to 40 per cent of them did not know the alphabet and could not count up to 10 after six months of basic education.

About half could not read paragraphs after five years of study and only about 12-14 per cent of Indian students went on to complete 10 years of education.

In 1989, the government led by Rajiv Gandhi launched a national literacy mission but realised it could not succeed if the government shouldered the task alone.

In 1994, when Mumbai was almost torn apart by riots, Dr Chavan said, Unicef was providing financial help to local governments, but the investment in educating Mumbai's children was ineffective.

Pratham - "first" or "primary" in Sanskrit - was founded to take up the challenge, involving the government, businesses and the community at large.

"Primary education was a priority and the [literacy] mission was the first of its kind to solve problems on such a large scale," said Dr Chavan. "That's why we thought it was appropriate to name the organisation Pratham."

The mission of Pratham was "every child in school and learning well".

"Every child means every girl child, every child from religious minorities who have been neglected, people in the hills who are without and every child disadvantaged in every caste they inherited over centuries should be given education."

Although the constitution no longer recognised the caste system, the social stigma still existed.

"Indian people are brought up in a hierarchical society. Some of my fellow Indians might get offended when I say this, but I think it's true, every Indian thinks about whether they are higher or lower than the next Indian in caste and income. It's engraved in us," he said.

"Our family names say what caste we are. Domination is something that people are looking for. This is feudal and the whole country is bureaucratic. People have not learnt democracy beyond elections.

"What we are doing is about education, but in fact it's about governance and democracy. India has a centralised system and a very feudal background."

For a long time, the relationship between the government and citizens was not defined, he said.

"[The literacy movement] is not about people's participation. It's about people's initiative and government's participation. We want to change that equation."

The state and local governments spent about US\$20 billion on education in 2005, amounting to nearly 4 per cent of gross domestic product. But Dr Chavan said the government was not paying attention to whether children were really learning in schools.

"If a child goes to fourth or fifth class and is not able to read or do anything with numbers, then education beyond that is impossible."

The figures spoke volumes about the inefficiency in government's education expenditure. The country's economy is growing by more than 9 per cent annually but, Dr Chavan said, the growth would not be sustainable if education was not there to provide enough engineers, scientists and skilled workers to back economic development.

"We're already feeling the pinch. This country can't afford to be an unskilled or educated country anymore ... Otherwise, at least 50 per cent if not more of the population will remain non-productive in the coming years."

According to Unesco, there are about 774 million adults in the world - roughly one in five - who cannot read or write. One of the six universal education goals set by countries during the 2000 World Education Forum in the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka, was to reach a target for adult literacy of 50 per cent by 2015.

"By 2015, the government would have achieved what was required numerically," Dr Chavan said.

"No one set a millennium economic development goal for India at 9.2 per cent. So how come you have the ambition to increase your economic goal to 9 per cent but for education you have to wait until 2015? India can't afford to wait until 2015 ... For us, the goal to improve the reading level of children is set at 2009. We have to accelerate.

"With 50 per cent of children who could read class-two levels after five years of schooling, we want to raise that level by at least 30 per cent by 2009."

Pratham is India's largest NGO working with the state and local governments, organising volunteers to uplift basic education nationwide. Last year, Pratham spent about US\$15 million and is looking to fork out US\$20 million in the 2008/09 financial year, equivalent to 0.1 per cent of the government's expenditure on education.

Pratham's urban slum programme has enabled 1.5 million children to attend daily classes over the last 15 years. Its programme for rural children has been conducted through collaboration with schools on a large scale.

"Just between January 2007 and July 2008, our estimate is that the programme reached about 21 million children," Dr Chavan said.

"If you compare the US\$20 million we need and the US\$20 billion the government is spending, the cost is very, very small."

Half of the donations came from the overseas Indian Diaspora and the rest came from corporations that invest in India.

Pratham has six overseas chapters, one each in the United States, Britain, Germany and the Middle East, and two in Canada. A seventh being set up in Hong Kong will be the first overseas chapter in Asia.

"We are coming to Hong Kong to appeal to people of Indian origin, people who are interested in India and those who think India must come out of this vicious circle of poverty and ignorance."

With most children in schools, but half not learning and half at risk of not completing their education, Dr Chavan said Pratham could help turn the situation around by helping teach children the basics first so they could become contributing citizens.

"And the cost required for this is one-thousandth of what the government has spent to catalyse the change. Hong Kong is a business and financial community. What they will understand is, if 50 per cent of the children don't learn then that means 50 per cent of the investment is not performing."

By investing an extra 0.1 per cent, investors could help the non-performing investment perform.

"That [is something] any businessman can understand," he said.

With a couple of rupees per child and a mission to eradicate illiteracy, Pratham has been able to mobilise hundreds of thousands of volunteers to visit states, cities and villages to teach children how to read. The volunteers have reached out into 21 out of 34 states, unions and territories across India.

For a feudal country with so many castes and barriers, Dr Chavan felt it was important to have a "human element" to break down the hulking bureaucracy.

Even though schools were evenly spread across the country, there would still be a disparity between how many children attend school on any given day from region to region.

In the south, the proportion of children going to school every day could be as high as 90 per cent, but it could be as low as 55 per cent to 60 per cent in the north where education had reached the villages relatively recently, Dr Chavan said.

"People think, 'we'll go to school tomorrow', if the children and parents are busy working in the farm earning daily wages," he said.

"So the habit formation does take a little while to happen."

Pratham approaches young people who originally came from the slums or villages but made it through college, and asks them to become volunteers.

"We ask them if they would help for 15 days in a year to make sure all the children in their home village know the whole alphabet," he said.

The recruitment drive has been successful.

"I think young people are really hungry to connect to something really simple and pure which is not corrupt, because they see corruption and manipulation all around them."

Each volunteer received about 100 rupees (HK\$16.75) worth of reading materials for a village with about 50 children. These lessons could take place in places of worship, teachers' homes, and community centers or even within schools.

"If I want to put it in numbers, a few million Indian children have learnt to read. Beyond that, I can't make any claims.

"But the fact is, India is changing and we are part of the change."