

BOTTOM-UP SCALING - FROM CLASSROOMS TO SYSTEMS

KEY OUTCOMES & LESSONS FROM 'SCALE-TaRL'

A Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)-based Pratham Government Partnership Project made possible by the generous support from the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF).

Executive Summary

The SCALE–TaRL¹ program is Pratham’s flagship effort to embed Teaching at the Right Level into government systems through district-level government partnerships. As highlighted in **Why SCALE–TaRL?** and **The Urgency of Foundational Learning**, the program responds to India’s learning crisis by demonstrating how foundational literacy and numeracy can be recovered and strengthened at scale. Between 2022 and 2024, arithmetic outcomes for children in Grades III–V improved significantly in districts like Satara and Dharashiv and the Union Territory of Dadar Nageri & Haveli & Daman & Diu, while upper-primary cohorts in Khunti made modest gains, underscoring both progress and the challenges ahead.

Through **What the Program Does** and **What We Have Achieved**, SCALE–TaRL has reached over 13,000 teachers, 4,400 schools, and 2.2 lakh children, while embedding assessments, mentoring, and data systems into government practice. Looking forward, **From Demonstration to System Leadership** lays out a path for sustaining learning gains, strengthening government ownership, and expanding successful models. Continued IDRF support is pivotal to deepen capacity, foster cross-learning, and extend impact to new regions.

(A) Why SCALE–TaRL? Origins, Rationale, and District-Level Partnerships

India’s school education system has achieved near-universal enrollment, but the challenge of ensuring learning with quality remains unsolved. Large numbers of children continue to progress through the schooling system without mastering the most basic skills of reading and arithmetic. The ASER surveys have repeatedly highlighted this gap: many children in Grade 3, 4 or 5 cannot read a Grade 2-level text or solve numerical operation problems. This mismatch between schooling and learning is at the core of the country’s learning crisis.

Pratham’s Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach has been developed over two decades precisely to address this problem. It starts by assessing children individually to establish their current learning levels, grouping them accordingly, and providing targeted activities that help them progress step by step. This simple but powerful approach has been rigorously evaluated in multiple contexts, both in India and abroad, and shown to deliver substantial gains in a relatively short time.

However, the open challenge has always been how to scale and sustain such an approach within large government school systems. While pilots work at ‘state scale’ have consistently demonstrated impact, embedding the practice into government education structures has its own set of challenges. This is where the SCALE–TaRL program, supported by IDRF, comes in.

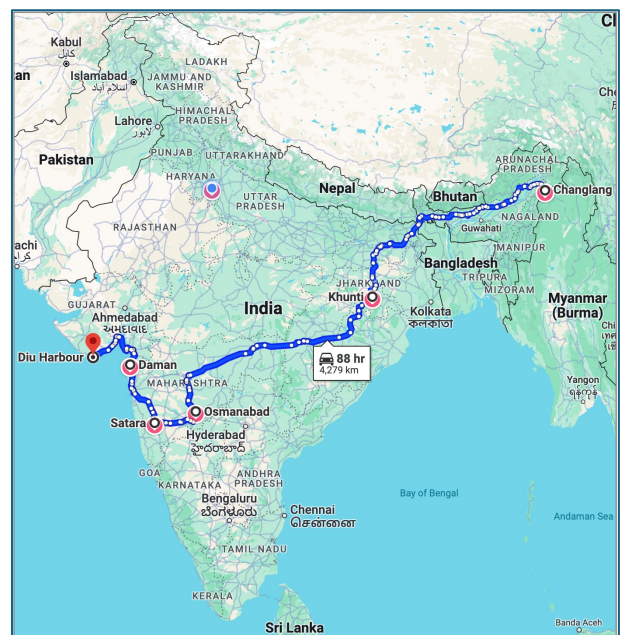
¹ SCALE-TaRL stands for - Strengthening Children's Foundational Learning at Scale Through Collaboration With District-Level Administrations Across India.

Rather than working in parallel to government systems, the program deliberately positions entire districts and union territories as demonstration sites. These sites serve to show how TaRL can be integrated into government-led training, mentoring, and monitoring mechanisms, and how district officials and education cadres themselves can become champions of the process.

The rationale for SCALE–TaRL is grounded in three key ideas. The first is urgency: unless children acquire foundational literacy and numeracy early, they are unable to benefit from further schooling, creating lifelong disadvantages and gaps with those progressing. The second is sustainability: meaningful learning reform requires government ownership. Only when teaching approaches are linked to assessments, mentoring, and reviews that are part of official processes will they endure. The third is local leadership: by creating a cadre of “leaders of practice” from within the system, the program ensures capacity remains in government hands even after external support tapers off. Under this program, four district partnerships and one UT partnership are underway across the breadth of India in different states/ UTs, namely:

The IDRF board and team reinforce this approach. The Board members noted that while the pedagogy of TaRL is already proven, the real challenge lies in scaling it through government systems. SCALE–TaRL was designed precisely for this— showing how systemic adoption can happen when technical expertise, government will, and donor support align.

1. **Changlang, Arunachal Pradesh** - Addressing historically low learning levels, this partnership focuses on improving Hindi, English, and Math for Grades 1-5. The program has trained 22 selected resource people from the government cadre and 390 teachers, impacting 3,188 children covering 15 clusters across 8 blocks in the academic year 2024-25.
2. **UT of Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu (DNH & DD)** - Through the *Ramta Ramta Seekho Abhiyan*, the partnership strengthens language and math skills covering Gujarati, Hindi, and Marathi language. From this year onwards (2025 and beyond), the intervention will be led completely by the Education department directly.
3. **Dharashiv, Maharashtra** - Targeting Grades 1 to 8 in school, the program also introduced *Gram Shiksha Kendras* to promote group learning across 8 blocks, in communities, with the support of district administration and DIETs. Acknowledging the importance of this initiative, community members donated books and raised money at the village level.
4. **Satara, Maharashtra** - Following the success of Pratham’s government partnerships in Dharashiv and Sangli, the district administration adopted a similar approach in Satara. Now in its third year, the partnership supports 2,669 schools and 7,000 teachers to strengthen foundational learning for children across the district.



- Khunti, Jharkhand** - The Baseline Assessment of Students for Improved Capacity (BASIC) project addresses learning gaps in upper primary (Grades 6 to 8), where children struggle with reading and arithmetic. By focusing on remedial learning, the program helps students move towards grade-level competencies.

(B) The Urgency of Foundational Learning: Evidence of Need

The need for SCALE–TaRL is underscored by both national outcomes and local realities, highlighting the importance of TaRL. Nationally, the ASER 2022 (see table below) survey painted a sobering picture: only one in three Grade 4 children could read a Grade 2-level text, and less than half of Grade 5 children achieved the same benchmark. Arithmetic results were equally concerning, with many children unable to solve simple division or subtraction problems even after years of schooling.

Indicators		Changlang	Satara	Osmanabad	Khunti
Govt school	% Children (age 6-14) enrolled in govt schools	55.1	76.4	75.6	68.6
Not in school	District % Children (age 6-14) not enrolled in school	4.4	0	0.1	1.7
Std III-V	% Children who can read Std II level text	21.1	51.2	48	18.7
	% Children who can do at least subtraction	41.0	42.4	34.5	24.4
Std VI-VIII	% Children who can read Std II level text	63.4	87.5	78	44.7
	% Children who can do division	36.6	35.9	30.7	17.9

Importantly, the program’s alignment with IDRF’s mission has been continuously acknowledged during board discussions. Board members have emphasized that the majority of children falling behind are from the poorest rural households, making SCALE–TaRL directly relevant to IDRF’s focus on underserved communities. While some concerns were raised about challenges of working with slow, uncertain systems and their corresponding risks, board members also noted that the potential rewards—changing the trajectories of hundreds of thousands of children—far outweighed them.

At the district level, baseline assessments in SCALE–TaRL district/ UT partnerships confirmed the urgency. In **Khunti district of Jharkhand**, many children in Grades 6–8 were unable to read a simple story or solve subtraction word problems. In **Changlang, Arunachal Pradesh**, learning levels were historically low, and these were further compounded by geographical isolation, poor connectivity, and multiple languages in use. Even in relatively better-performing states like **Maharashtra**, assessments in **Dharashiv** and **Satara** revealed that a significant proportion of children lacked foundational skills.

The policy environment also emphasised the need for such an intervention. The NIPUN Bharat Mission, launched under the National Education Policy 2020, set ambitious targets for foundational literacy and numeracy by 2026–27. However, its primary focus has been on Grades

1 to 3. This left older children, especially those in Grades 4 and 5 and even higher grades, without structured remedial support. SCALE–TaRL was positioned to fill this critical “missing middle grades,” ensuring that children in later grades are not left behind.

(C) What the Program Does: Core Components and Objectives

SCALE–TaRL program components are not a one-off remedial approach but a carefully designed set of components that reinforce each other. Together, they aim to create systemic change at the district level while delivering immediate learning gains for children.

The **first core component** is the capacity building of government cadres. The program invests in training “master trainers” and “leaders of practice” drawn from within the government. These individuals conduct practice classes themselves, mentor teachers, and lead review sessions. Over time, they evolve into independent drivers of the approach. By creating this cadre, the program ensures that knowledge and skills remain embedded within the system.

The **second component** is teaching–learning implementation in classrooms. After assessing children’s learning levels, teachers group them accordingly and use simple, low-cost materials such as story cards, number games, and charts. These materials are adapted to local languages and contexts. Teachers are supported through cadres who have conducted practice classes themselves, demonstration lessons, and mentoring visits. The emphasis is on making TaRL an integrated part of classroom practice, not an add-on that disrupts regular schooling.

The **third component** is assessment and data systems. Baseline, midline, and endline assessments track children’s progress and inform teaching. In some partnerships, these assessments have been fully institutionalised. For example, in **DNH&DD**, ASER-style assessments are now part of the annual academic calendar. In **Dharashiv**, Pratham’s digital monitoring tools were embedded into the district’s official dashboard, ensuring that data flows into government systems.

The **fourth component** is mentoring, monitoring, and review. Regular school visits, structured observation tools, and joint district-level reviews help maintain momentum. Data from visits feed into dashboards accessible to officials, strengthening transparency and accountability. This structured approach has been a key factor in building confidence among teachers and administrators that sustained effort leads to improved outcomes.

The **fifth component** is community engagement. Recognising that learning does not only happen in schools, SCALE–TaRL has created platforms in communities. *Gram Shiksha Kendras* in **Dharashiv** and **Satara**, *Hamari Duniya* groups in **Khunti**, and *CAMaL ka Camp* during the summer break across states have mobilized youth volunteers and parents to support children’s learning. In **Dharashiv**, communities went a step further by contributing books and even funds to sustain activities.

Finally, SCALE–TaRL has also emphasized the internal capacity of Pratham teams. Pratham teams across partnerships participated in cross-visits, practice classes, and central workshops during the duration of the program. These opportunities allowed the team to reflect, share innovations, and strengthen their own ability to provide high-quality technical support.

Together, these components serve three overarching objectives: (i) improving literacy and numeracy outcomes in Grades 1–8; (ii) building durable district–state partnerships where governments lead training, mentoring, and reviews; and (iii) developing models that are context-sensitive yet replicable, so they can inform state-level policy and practice.

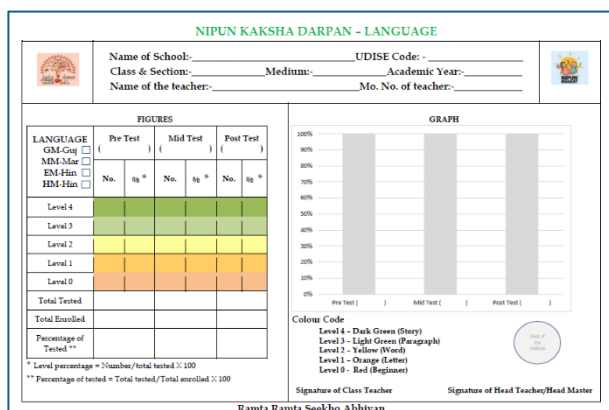
(D) What We Have Achieved: Outcomes and Systemic Shifts

Between January 2024 and July 2025 (18 months), the SCALE–TaRL program demonstrated striking improvements in children’s learning and significant qualitative shifts in government systems. In terms of reach, across the program, **13,365 teachers**, supported by 780 master trainers were trained. Across **35 blocks and 405 clusters** (1 Union territory and 4 districts), it reached 4,481 schools. More than **219,000 children were tested at baseline, and close to 201,000 at endline**, reflecting the scale of the intervention. At scale, the program operated at a cost per child of less than 1 USD (i.e. about INR 41).

The learning results were equally impressive. For Grades 3–5, story-level reading improved by between **13 and 19 percentage points**. In 2024-25 academic year, in **Satara**, the percentage of children able to read a Grade 2-level story rose from 68 percent at baseline to 82 percent by endline. In **Dharashiv**, 74 percent children could read a story by the end of the program. In mathematics, improvements of **over 20 percentage points** were observed in children’s ability to solve division and subtraction problems, with more than **80 percent able to do subtraction with borrow by endline**.

In **Khunti**, where the focus was on older children in Grades 6–8, the results were dramatic. Overall, the proportion of children able to read a story **rose by 49 percentage points**, from zero at baseline to nearly half by endline. The highest gains were seen in Grade 8, where reading ability rose by 56 percentage points. Arithmetic outcomes followed a similar pattern, with the ability to solve subtraction word problems rising by 33 percentage points overall, and by 38 percentage points in Grade 8.

In DNH&DD, where many children were already fluent readers, the program introduced an “advanced package” called Beyond Basics. Here too, substantial gains were seen. Comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar scores rose by **more than 20 percentage points**. Children’s creative writing improved both in length and accuracy, with the average number of sentences written **increasing from 4.1 to 4.8**. Arithmetic outcomes also improved significantly: profit and loss word problems, for example, saw a **25 percentage point gain**, from **38 percent correct at baseline to 63 percent at endline**.



Beyond learning data, the program demonstrated important systemic changes. In DNH&DD, ASER assessments became part of the official academic calendar, ensuring regular measurement of children’s progress. In Dharashiv, Pratham’s dashboards were integrated into government systems, giving officials real-time data. Across locations,

customized tools like report cards and district partnership groups were created, reflecting government-led adaptation.

ASER data between 2022 and 2024 indicate a visible learning recovery in arithmetic among children in Std III–V. In Changlang, the gains in arithmetic over this period were more pronounced than those observed in reading, suggesting that focused numeracy interventions had stronger traction. In Dharashiv, the percentage of children in Std III–V able to solve a two-digit by two-digit subtraction problem improved by 11.8 percentage points, bringing the district on par with the Maharashtra state average in arithmetic. In Satara, progress was even more striking: arithmetic levels in Std III–V surpassed 80 percent, significantly higher than the state average, with a remarkable improvement of 42.3 percentage points from 2022 to 2024. These results show how targeted foundational programs can help children recover lost ground and, in some places, even exceed state benchmarks.

District	ASER 2018		ASER 2022	ASER 2024	pp change from ASER 2022 to ASER 2024	vs State (ASER 2024)
Changlang, Arunachal Pradesh	27.7	C O V I D	21.1	22.7	(+) 1.6	26.8
Dharashiv, Maharashtra	53.4		48	61.8	(+) 13.8	50.3
Khunti, Jharkhand (Std VI-VIII)	64.5		44.7	68.3	(+) 23.6	61.1
Satara, Maharashtra	76		51.2	79.3	(+) 28.1	50.3

However, the picture is more mixed in upper primary grades. In Khunti district of Jharkhand, the proportion of Std VI–VIII children who could solve division problems rose by only 5.8 percentage points between 2022 and 2024. This contrast highlights a dual reality: while younger cohorts are showing strong recovery and acceleration in arithmetic, older children continue to lag, requiring sustained and more intensive support to close persistent gaps.

The program also created a cadre of master trainers who are now widely recognized as leaders of practice. These trainers plan and conduct practice classes, support teachers with data-driven mentoring, and reinforce classroom quality. Their emergence shows that ownership has begun to shift from external support to the system itself.

The IDRF Board discussions acknowledged that while attribution of outcomes cannot rest on IDRF’s funds alone, the grant has been catalytic. IDRF’s support leveraged many times over by government spending, has seeded systemic reforms that go far

Finally, the success of these partnerships has sparked momentum for expansion. Districts such as **Raigad** and **Gondia** in **Maharashtra** and **Ranchi** in **Jharkhand** have expressed interest in adopting similar models in the SCALE-TaRL states. Other district partnerships have emerged under the same model in states of West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh and Meghalaya – signalling an opportunity for further expansion in a standardised, structured manner.

(E) From Demonstration to System Leadership: The Way Forward

The SCALE–TaRL program now stands at a pivotal moment. All five partnerships—**Changlang, DNH&DD, Khunti, Dharashiv, and Satara**—have progressed from short-term demonstrations to stable, multi-year collaborations, with formal MoUs or acknowledgements in place until the end of the 2025–26 academic year. In each case, governments are increasingly taking the lead in funding training, deploying cadres, and providing materials. This shift marks an important

transition: Pratham’s role is evolving from implementation-heavy support to strategic technical assistance, with a focus on mentoring master trainers, facilitating reviews, and documenting lessons for wider influence.

The program’s achievements so far clearly demonstrate that when governments, communities, and technical partners work together, foundational learning outcomes can improve rapidly and sustainably. Significant gains have been recorded in children’s literacy and numeracy. Government ownership of training and assessment processes has grown stronger. Communities have been mobilized to support learning, and there is visible momentum for expansion to new districts and states. At the same time, SCALE–TaRL’s experience highlights the challenges of working at scale in diverse contexts. Each partnership operates at a different pace, with varying levels of government engagement and ownership. The uneven timelines and commitment levels mean that integration into government systems progresses differently across districts. Because

As one board director observed, this is a “partnership worthy of full support.” With continued technical guidance, strategic funding, and system leadership, SCALE–TaRL provides a pathway to achieving the vision of foundational literacy and numeracy for all children in India.

most partnerships are still relatively small in scale, opportunities for cross-learning and systematic sharing of best practices remain limited. Resource and technical constraints—whether in content, measurement frameworks, or specialist expertise—also continue to test the program’s ability to provide consistent, high-quality support everywhere.

Yet these challenges underscore the unique opportunity of pursuing a “bottom-up scaling” strategy. By embedding TaRL directly within government systems, SCALE–TaRL demonstrates how change can be initiated locally and sustained over time. Districts are proving to be the ideal unit for this work: large enough to represent government scale, yet small enough to allow for flexibility, adaptation, innovation, and close review. District-level partnerships have become living demonstrations of how system-led reform can take root, building evidence that can inform state and national education policy.

Going forward, five priorities will guide the way. The program will focus on protecting continuity of learning gains to ensure a smooth transition to government-led implementation. It will continue to strengthen institutional capacity by embedding support during the handover period. District-specific adaptation will be encouraged, allowing each location to refine the approach to its own needs. Documentation and policy influence will be prioritized, so that the lessons from these partnerships can shape broader reform. And throughout, the program will reinforce government ownership, keeping the vision of a self-sustaining foundational learning ecosystem at the center.

Continued support from IDRF is essential for sustaining this momentum. With IDRF’s backing, Pratham can deepen technical capacity in the field, create stronger platforms for cross-learning, and expand successful district-level models into new regions. In doing so, SCALE–TaRL will not only consolidate the gains made so far but also accelerate progress toward a future where every child in India achieves foundational literacy and numeracy within the public education system.