

Transforming Education in Rural India

by Amit Pamecha



People have often asked me about the reasons for my entrepreneurial success. In thinking hard, I have mostly come to the conclusion that it was because of the “opportunities” my education created for me. I grew up in Jaipur, India and my parents made sure that I got admitted the best school in town – a Jesuit school with mostly American teachers. After that, I went to IIT Delhi and then to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. In both cases, I came across some of the most dedicated teachers and some of the smartest fellow students, who always pushed you to do more and go harder at everything.

In trying to give back what I had received, I have started thinking about creating similar

opportunities for thousands of rural children who do not get the necessary exposure or opportunities. This goal led me to my initial visit to villages in rural Rajasthan, my home state in India. What I discovered was somewhat different from what I had expected.

As a lot of us know, the government-run educational system in India does not always operate as efficiently as one would expect – with a lack of teachers, closed schools, deficient infrastructure and other issues. In visiting villages of less than three hundred residents, my assumption was that I would mostly find children with little or no education and an inability to read, write or do basic math. However, where the government-run schools

have failed, private schools (mostly of low quality but much better than public schools) have begun to appear in towns of less than five thousand and are able to attract children locally and from nearby villages. Farmers who can hardly make ends meet are sending these children to these schools because they realize there is no future in farming, with rising inflation, a depleted water table and low crop prices.

Unfortunately, the quality of this education is still very poor for multiple reasons: It focuses on the lowest level of learning in a class or subgroup; it does not leverage any modern tools for learning, including digital learning and the Internet; the teachers are mostly untrained and do not measure progress; and lastly it creates a false illusion amongst the parents and in the children's mind that they are on a path to progress and good jobs.



In trying to solve the above problems, I had two choices – go village by village and try to build a local team that could alter the current paradigm by offering digital learning, trained teachers, individual assessment and a curriculum that focused on problem solving and life skills, or find an organization that was aligned with or was already doing this.

In my search for the second alternative and to avoid re-inventing the wheel, I discovered Pratham. My initial interaction with Pratham

came through meetings with the chapter in Washington DC. I was pleasantly surprised by the zeal and the energy of the DC supporters even though they had their own careers and senior jobs to focus on. We chatted about how Pratham's model worked with individual assessments and camps that helped students progress meaningfully. But at this point, this was still just a conversation.

I then decided to head back to India and meet the Pratham team which was actually working in the field to find out more. What I discovered was absolutely amazing and exceeded all my expectations, for example:

- The first step in improving the educational outcome for any child is to understand his or her current skill and knowledge level and work from there. In elementary schools, within the same grade, you can find children who can barely read, and yet there are others who can devour complete books. Teaching basic reading to the latter group is a waste of talent and opportunity. I discovered that Pratham has built a very powerful library of materials that individually assess each child for their skill level rather than focusing on the grade level.
- Once we know how each child is performing, the next step is to provide a curriculum that is tailored for that child. Pratham has again built a huge repository of content that is available to the student, the teacher and the parents so that each child can progress at their own pace and move rapidly forward.
- The other piece of the puzzle is having well-trained teachers who understand the above two points, are well familiar with the curriculum and teaching materials. and are able to challenge the students. This requires a training program that helps teachers understand how to teach

effectively and to measure progress. One of Pratham's core foci is to work with the teachers to help them become better.

- India is also being transformed by the availability of widespread data connectivity and access to smartphones. It's natural that a kid who is able to expertly use a smartphone can both read and write and enhance her analytical skills. In addition, there are thousands of hours of programming available on the Internet that can help children learn about a myriad of things based on their interest. This programming also creates exposure for children who have never traveled beyond

10 or 20 km of their home. Pratham is providing digital tablets preloaded with content to these rural schools so that children can leverage digital programming.

In essence, Pratham has developed a blueprint for successfully transforming rural education. The Jaipur visit has given me confidence that I can actually reach thousands of children at scale through Pratham rather than doing it village by village. It has also led to the genesis of the next step – to connect these children with the opportunities that exist and give each child the bright future that they deserve!

