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FEATURE ARTICLES**PRATHAM: BUILDING THE BRIDGE OF KNOWLEDGE**

services of a group of young and successful professionals to go to the far flung remote corners of these slums to answer the hundreds of questions school going children have?"

"Pratham, the NGO, has not only been doing all the above but in very innovative ways. And the costs involved? Only a fraction of what one would imagine, and in some cases absolutely free! Pratham's mission is to ensure that every child goes to school and learns well. Being an NGO, funding is only through donations from philanthropists. It is always a struggle to make both ends meet. Truly and literally, inventions have fulfilled necessity."

Meeting Preethi Ranjan

To know more about Pratham, SOM meet Preethi Agarwal Ranjan in an Alice-in-Wonderland kind of way. When SOM landed up at the Pratham premises, Preethi arrived at the same time and we both found the place locked. We discovered it was way past 5 PM and everyone had gone home. Then we repaired to Preethi's house where we discovered that Preethi did not have the keys so we sat on the lawns and chatted.

SOM: Tell me, Preethi, what is it that you do? Apart from inviting people like to sit on the lawns of your garden?"

Preethi Agarwal Ranjan (PAR): Well, to start with we are not a formal kind of set up. We are not into formal education. We create a learning experience for underprivileged kids in the City. We get around 70 or more kids and many parents at every one of our weekly sessions."

SOM: "Hang on; let's go over this again..."

PAR: "Well, (Preethi laughs a lot) We go to these areas like Ghousianagar and Shanti Nagar which we have been doing for some time now. Children in these areas do not really go to school on a regular basis. Our weekly sessions are a kind of learning experiences where we create awareness about everything from how magnets work to the Solar system, from multimedia to what have you."

SOM: It is a classroom and yet it is not a classroom ?

PAR: Well, a classroom experience may even put them off school. We have all been through this classroom thing with the teacher at one end and us at the receiving end. I know how bad it used to be... Fun and games are a part of this joint learning process. We have around 20 to 30 volunteers at every session and all of them have been regularly coming. Our target children are between 10 and 15 years old. Most of the kids at our sessions are at the lower end of this scale."

SOM: What happens next?

PAR: You know something? If you attend the next weekly session of the volunteers you will get a better idea"

SOM rendezvous ' with Preethi at Pratham .

Chairs are placed in a sort of loosely defined circle in a room that is a rectangle. There are young men and women seated in frozen anticipation and we begin the Spanish Inquisition.

Pratham is not just another NGO. They do not get funds from any government body, they are just a bunch of enthusiastic volunteers who give up their time for an hour or two every week and share it with young underprivileged children by becoming catalysts in the exchange of knowledge. Pratham is a Knowledge Bridge. Pratham is a product of necessity. There is a divide between those who have the benefits of education and those who do not have such breaks. Pratham bridges this divide. The weekend Star Supplement provides an insight into the activities of Pratham.

Pratham of knowledge in the City !!!

It's hard not to be carried away by Preethi Agarwal Ranjan's enthusiasm. She is the prime motivator of Pratham and she talks about Pratham with a passion that is infectious and in the end you find yourself asking her where to sign up!

Pratham is located bang opposite the St. Joseph's institution at the end of Temple Road, Jayalaxmipuram. If you drop by on a Saturday evening you will find an passionate bunch of youngsters planning their next visit to the inner city areas of the under-privileged like Shantinagar and Ghousianagar and without being aware you are likely to be carried away by the enthusiasm of Preethi, Sweta, Ruchika, Sakeeb, Anna, Ruth and 20 other youngsters, and find yourself being a part of Pratham.

What is Pratham? Another NGO? Another do-gooder in the ever-growing list of goody-goody do-gooders? First, Pratham is NOT just another NGO. They do not get funds from any government body. They depend solely on voluntary donations.

Pratham Mysore is composed of a bunch of enthusiastic volunteers who give up their time for an hour or two every week and share it with young underprivileged children by exchanging ideas, news, thoughts etc. Pratham is more than literacy programme. It is a Knowledge Bridge. Let's get Ashwiini Ranjan the man who brought Pratham to the Heritage City say what this all about: " Pratham is a product of necessity and is driven by inventions. There is no such thing as a free meal. Nothing comes free.

There is always a give, to take in one form or the other. If this be true, imagine the costs of educating 10,000 children in the slums and underprivileged locations; engaging the services of a thousand teachers to teach in the villages; or enlisting the

flung remote corners of these slums to answer the hundreds of questions school

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SOM: "I gather that none of you are professional teachers?"

The silence is deafening, till PAR tries to break the ice by saying:

"No. Only one of us has any links as a teacher. Perhaps this lack of teaching experience is really going for us. It makes us more connected to the children, we are more like friends"

At this point, Ranjith software professional chips in: "What we do is share our knowledge."

SOM: "I am still not clear"...

Ranjith: "We want these weekly sessions to become 'Learning centre experiences for the children."

At this point Jayanth and Swetha pipe up: "In our last session at Shanti Nagar we spoke about magnets, conducts experiments with magnets. These kids watch TV and yet this was a unique session for them, exciting at the same time informative."

Jayanth: "I recall one session when we talked about the solar system. We had come armed with slides, posters...."

SOM: First tell me, Jayanth, what made you come to Pratham?

Jayanth: "There are a few things in life which money can't buy. And only after joining Pratham, did I really understand what that means. What I do at Knowledge Bridge makes my heart feel truly happy. We ourselves become small children playing with them, teaching them and having fun. After the sessions, while we pack up, each one of them comes near, shakes our hands and says, "Thank you, Sir"! Sometimes it's a thank you, sometime a hug or sometimes a special smile...."

SOM: "And that makes all the difference, I bet...".

Ruchika is the odd one out. She is a teaching counselor and has first hand experience of the Jiddu Krishnamurti and Rudolf Steiner kind of education process.

Ruchika: "What we are attempting to do is change the traditional pattern of schooling from a one-way communication into a two-way interactive discussions where each session becomes a learning session for the volunteer and the child. Children establish their own learning process. This helps build up the child's communication skills."

Maresh, a co-ordinator at Pratham has this to say: "I feel that being part of the KB Program is a most satisfying experience. All the success goes to our young and dynamic team of volunteers. These youngsters are not spending their weekends in cinemas, parks or parties but with our kids in slum locations. They really care about these kids and share their Knowledge with lot of fun and play. Encouraging them to ask questions every week, and answer them in such easy ways! Each child is happy to learn new things about the sun, moon, air, water, animals, birds, trees, computers... and of course, how to be good, what is good and bad. These young volunteers are surely our kids' role models, because every child wants to become a software engineer, doctor, teacher or social worker etc. I request more volunteers to join this wonderful program, so that our other children who are living in different locations will benefit too!"

Saqeeb Sait a student, quiet, diffident and to the point says: "There is a creation of awareness here, that is taking place. This awareness has also become a part of the parents of these children. They really reach out. It is amazing how several parents make it a point to attend the Saturday sessions."

Ruth Kinzy is a young German lady who ought to have been in a film by Werner Fassbinder. She is that serious: "These sessions are like taking a small step towards acquiring knowledge. I think out interactions mean a lot to the children. They look forward to meeting us. I am asked so many questions about my country, where I was born ...what I do... questions, questions and all of them interesting."

Ruchika %0000enters this point: "We interact with these children not in the traditional Balwadi kind of way at all. The level of enthusiasm of these children is very high. They ask hundreds of questions even about multimedia."

Madhukar another collegian and a volunteer has this to say: " We do not impose our thoughts or our mindset on these children. They have the freedom to ask questions of every kind."

Anne Mahlow, another young German volunteer who has been silent till now says: "The Pratham Knowledge Bridge gives children the opportunity to learn about several topics and ask questions, which, in my opinion, is the most important point. This program isn't just a presentation of a certain topic, it is also lots of communication between us and the kids and between the kids themselves. Encouraging them to think and to ask whatever they want. We get an amazing response from them. Sometimes the discussion takes much more time than the presentation itself. The only thing left to say is that, there are a lot of curious children out there and we should not let them wait."

Yashwini Prakash and Swathi Pandurangi are of the opinion that what they hope to achieve through their knowledge bridge sessions is to create in children analytical skills. Preethi adds saying: "They are trying to come up with innovative ways of working with these children. We hope to add various elements like theatre, for instance. A library is next on our agenda and this should happen soon."

On that note SOM took leave of Pratham.

Ashvini Ranjan on the Knowledge Bridge

There is a desire in every person irrespective of his standing in society to give, help and share... more so among the young. This desire remains dormant as they either do not know what and how to give, or it's just too much trouble finding a recipient to what they wish to give.

On the other hand, there are many young children among the less privileged in the society who struggle to find answers to basic questions in their minds. Questions about how a computer and the internet work, or why the sky is blue, what is global warming etc. These questions are gathered by Pratham under its "Knowledge Bridge" program and made available to those wanting to help. A Saturday afternoon and a classroom in a school are fixed. The children seeking answers to their questions gather in the classroom. The volunteers who offer their services come to the venue for and share their knowledge, for all of 60 minutes. Other than travel costs, there are no costs involved. To the young person, it is a sense of satisfaction that he has given something back to the society."

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