

UNCOMMON GROUND  
ROHINI NILEKANI

## FOR THE CHILDREN OF INDIA

In this, the final column in this series, I turn to a core area of my work over the past decade—the education and development of young children.

Some sights and sounds remain sharply etched in the mind—the five-year-old in a preschool that we had set up in a Bangalore slum, who cheerily sang a rhyme about butterflies but said she had never seen one; the little children in the fields in Bettiah, who looked like they were just playing, but in actuality were catching tiny fish from the ponds for their dinner; the 10-year-old boy who stood outside a school in Kolar, but could not bridge the social distance to get in.

Often, I wonder—what is it about our society that we allow the children to be among the most deprived in the world? Cutting across class and caste and region, why do we seem to care so little about the inalienable rights of the child to a childhood of love and joy and good health and good education? How does a society of adults become accountable for the treatment of its youngest citizens?

Let's set aside the more abominable atrocities for a moment, and focus on early education. The debate has shifted to higher studies, but we cannot afford to take the foot off the pedal on elementary education. It is the foundation on which equal opportunity rests.

There is far more to be done in making schools accountable to the child for what

The debate has shifted to higher studies, but we cannot afford to take the foot off the pedal on early education

she learns, and how she learns it.

There are differing viewpoints on how this can be achieved—from the idea of a common school system, to that of school choice. It is unlikely that these two extremes can ever meet but, in the meanwhile, there is a whole range of policies that can move the needle along.

At Akshara Foundation, for instance, we worked closely with the Karnataka education department to help create supplementary teaching material, with which children left behind were able to ramp up their language and math skills. We also enabled a geographic information system, or GIS, based technology backbone that allowed the monitoring of progress on a child-to-child basis at the

entire district level. This is data which currently the system does not collate. More investments are needed to design a bottom-up, appropriate information symmetry that can be equally accessed by parents, school-level administrations, and by the district and the state.

School libraries are just one more instance of a neglected infrastructure that we need a nationwide spotlight on. Sometimes, we talk of a laptop for every child or broadband connectivity for every school when the more immediate task of getting children good books to read remains in shambles. Hundreds of millions of children currently have no access to the joyful reading that made our own childhood special. And the sad truth is there are simply not enough books in the market anyway. When we set up school and community libraries, we bought every book that was available written by Indian authors for children and found only a few hundred books in any language. Pratham Books was born out of this lacuna. In the past five years, we have created more than 150 titles, translated into seven or eight languages each and have put seven million books into the hands of eager young children.

But that is nowhere near enough. The Children's Book Trust, the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) and private publishers such as Tulika have been creating just a handful of children's books each year. What we really need is to foster a whole industry that creates millions of attractive and appropriate books for children and channel them into the school system and into *gram* panchayat libraries. In an economy that is based so much on textual knowledge for self-empowerment, this is the least we can do to prepare children.

The preparation can begin even earlier

than grade one. We all know that India has the world's most malnourished children. Yet the Anganwadi-ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) scheme, which aims to reach every child in the country by 2012, did not get the appropriate increase in budget allocation to achieve that goal. Meeting the nutritional and developmental needs of children till the age of 6 is absolutely critical for the educational journey they will undertake. Anganwadi children need much more material for playful learning. They also need simple textual content, which children of more affluent homes easily access. As three-year-olds, my children spent hours every day with delightful story books. But the children of the Anganwadis have no such resource, either in the preschool or in their homes. And there is not enough public attention to this critical gap in a child's life.

We need to refocus sharply on improving the lives of young children. The horrendous numbers hold a mirror to us that something more is going on, something that goes beyond economics. It tells us that the dialogue needs to shift to a debate on values—those slightly embarrassing, seemingly namby-pamby things that have no traditional place in a financial newspaper.

For India's children, things clearly will not change by themselves. If it takes a village to raise a child, it would take a whole nation to properly raise the 10 million children born in India every year.

*Rohini Nilekani*

*Rohini Nilekani works with and supports many non-profit endeavours, especially in water, through Arghyam Foundation. Comment at [uncommonground@livemint.com](mailto:uncommonground@livemint.com)*

