

# Campaign Read India: Get them glued to books, happily

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ON International Literacy Day, it is time to do some stock-taking. And statistics do not console when it comes to the continuing high rate of school dropouts and the inability of even 50 percent of children going to government schools to read fluently.

But the picture is not entirely bleak. In Bangalore, the Akshara Foundation is spearheading the 'Read India' initiative, a nationwide campaign by Pratham Resource Centre. 'Read India' is a three-pronged strategy which aims to inculcate the reading habit in one million children in the next five years.

At the launch of the Read India Movement, Rohini Nilekani, chairperson of Akshara Foundation, explained the need for the initiative saying there were only

about 1,000 titles in any regional language for new readers. "Read India books will bring a revolution into the book market. As of now, the limited reading material means that children who do learn to read have not much more than textbooks to read," said Nilekani.

Addressing the gathering in part-English, part-Kannada, Nilekani's presentation gave a

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glimpse of exciting titles in Kannada that would soon be made available to the children. Having successfully tried out the accelerated reading programme, a simple module that can teach children to read in 45 days, in Mokhada district in Maharashtra, Pratham is now ready to use the approach for the Read India initiative.

Read India's three-pronged strategy involves 'Odonia Banni'

(the accelerated reading programme), the launch of Read India books (a new label providing cheap yet high quality books in various Indian languages) and a library project (to develop a network of easily accessible community libraries). Tulika Books have published *The Why Why Girl* by Mahashweta Devi, which is the first title being launched under the

Read India label.

Launching the book and distributing copies of the Kannada version—*Yaake Yaake Hudugi* translated by Gnanpeeth winning playwright Girish Karnad, cricket icon Rahul Dravid congratulated the Akshara Foundation for doing their bit to encourage the reading habit and giving children the opportunity to devour good books. The children, of course, were the

most excited and greeted their hero Dravid with resounding applause.

But the biggest treat was yet to come. For who can resist a good story, and when well-known theatre personality Jayashree B. began reading out of the book to her eager young audience, there was not one face in the hall that stayed untouched by the endless curiosity of Moina, the little tribal girl who wanted to know why fish don't talk, why stars are so small, why school gets over..., and so on.

Jayashree went up and down the stage, alternately becoming little Moina, and all the people she questions. Nothing could curb her enthusiasm, not even a power breakdown midway through the programme. Dravid sat among his little fans and seemed to enjoy the animated story-telling as much as they did.

V.P. Baligar, Commissioner for Public Instructions, said that

Turn to Page 3



Rahul Dravid with Mahashweta Devi's book *The Why Why Girl's* Kannada translation by Girish Karnad in Bangalore on Monday

— Express photo by S. Manjunath

