



Spreading the Joy of Reading

For the last 30 years, Katha India has been working tirelessly towards transforming the lives of over one million children by helping them bring themselves out of poverty and live a better life.

words // Neha Kirpal images // Sachin Nair

Their mission is simple—to educate children sustainably through storybooks, in order to make them agents of change in their communities. Their goal is to not just create caring, mature, responsive and responsible citizens who are financially self-sufficient, but to also enhance the joy of reading in the process. By seamlessly connecting the grassroots work in education and urban resurgence, Katha initiates children living in poverty into reading and quality education. Over the past three decades, through its many programmes, Katha has helped over one million

children help themselves out of poverty.

From conceptualising books to education modules, teacher training programmes, forging strategic partnerships and translating stories, Katha culture-links the wealth of India's linguistic diversity to strengthen nation building. Through its various programmes, Katha has served children in government schools in 1,002 slum communities and introduced 9.2 million children and youth to the joy of reading. Their hallmark programme, I Love Reading Campaign, was taken to 10 government schools in 2004.

A transformation initiative, the campaign was extended further in 2009, where it reached out to 88,000 children in 88 MCD schools and 126 communities. The campaign led to a 30 per cent increase in attendance as well as a 100 per cent overall retention rate.

Katha Utsav is the organisation's annual festival consisting of stimulating talks, writers' workshops, challenge rounds and awards. Another of Katha's interesting initiatives is the Community Owned and Operated Libraries (or COOL) that were launched in 2017 in several slum communities across Delhi. More

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than 65 of these learning centres have been set up in people's homes. A handful of youngsters from these communities have been trained to set up these libraries or storyrooms, and have gone onto become effective 'reader-leaders' for children in their respective areas.

In 2018, Katha was also credited with creating India's first mobile reading application in Hindi. KathaKhazana, an immersive storytelling mobile application, is a repository of engaging digital content (comprising animation, games, characters and narration) that introduces children to the big ideas of gender equality, equity, diversity and inclusivity.

THE BEGINNING

When Katha's founder—award-winning writer, editor, social entrepreneur and educationist—Geeta Dharmarajan returned from the US to India in the late 1980s, she came across an alarming UNICEF report which mentioned that every day 400 children in India die of diarrhoea. Around the same time, the results of the 42nd National Sample Survey (1986–87) revealed that one of the top reasons for children dropping out of school was not only to support their families, but also because they found school boring and the lessons taught irrelevant. In 1988, Geeta started Katha with a magazine called *Tamasha* for

children from the underserved communities. The main thrust of the activity magazine was to spread health awareness. Apart from this, the publication also challenged stereotypes and prejudices.

EDUCATING THROUGH STORIES

In 1990, Katha's first school, the Khazana Experiment, started as a learning centre in one of the largest slum clusters in New Delhi, Govindpuri, with five children and no textbooks. Without any formal teaching aid or learning tool, this later evolved into the Katha Lab School, which uses a unique method of teaching—StoryPedagogy© or Active Story





RECOGNITION

Over the years, Katha's tremendous work has been recognised in the form of several awards, such as the mBillionth South Asia Award (2018), the Millennium Alliance Award (2013), the ICICI India Inclusive Award (2012) and the India NGO Awards (2009).



the training of 100 CloudGurus, enabling them to lead their own learning clusters of government school teachers. Through the initiative, over 17,000 teachers and 4,00,000 community women have been trained and empowered.

In 1995, Katha's School of Entrepreneurship started with a vision to impart technical and vocational skills like baking, sewing and other vocational skills to children, so that they can earn a livelihood and start their own business ventures. In 2001, the Katha Information Technology & E-Commerce School began with 13 donated computers. The programme offers IT education to children and residents of the communities, thus enhancing job opportunities for them.



THE WAY FORWARD

With the organisation having recently completed three decades, one of its major future plans include what they call the nationwide 300-Million Challenge. India has 300 million children enrolled in schools. About 150 million 5–10 year olds are in primary education, of which nearly 50 per cent cannot read. Through collaboration with partners, stakeholders, governments, non-profits and private schools, Katha's 300-Million Challenge aims to support grade-level reading for these 300 million children by spreading the joy of reading. For this, Katha plans to leverage its 'Each One Teach One' model, whereby each child who can read helps one child who cannot, to bring learning to an equitable platform. Katha's future plans also include expanding its reach beyond Delhi, and further replicating the StoryPedagogy© model in schools that are in other cities and states of the country. 🌟

Based Learning—in which teachers use a variety of techniques (ranging from theatre, dance, music, sports, storytelling and film) to creatively engage children in learning. The syllabus not only incorporates relevant portions from language, science, maths, social sciences, but also builds knowledge competencies in issues related to civics, health, environment, conservation, politics, governance, urban vs. rural realities and poverty by making available questioning spaces as well as lifelong learning skills. In a nutshell, the Katha Relevant Education for All-round Development is an invisible and practical curriculum based on a strong philosophy combining the best of the east and the west.

Till date, the school has created value for 1,91,190 children, many of whom work as entrepreneurs, in the government or in companies like IBM. In 2016, Katha was invited by the government to mainstream its StoryPedagogy©, which led to the organisation adopting five schools in the South Delhi Municipal Corporation under the School Quality Enhancement programme.

In 1990, Katha started Kalpana Vilasam, the centre for creativity in education—a teacher training programme for teachers at the Kathashala main school as well as its community schools. The centre also assists teachers in making learning materials and classroom lesson plans. This has resulted in