

# Embedding Innovation in State Systems: Lessons from Pratham in India

Masooda Bano and Zeena Oberoi

## Abstract

The learning crisis in many developing countries has led to searches for innovative teaching models. Adoption of innovation, however, disrupts routine and breaks institutional inertia, requiring government employees to change their way of working. Introducing and embedding innovative methods for improving learning outcomes within state institutions is thus a major challenge. For NGO-led innovation to have large-scale impact, we need to understand: (1) what factors facilitate its adoption by senior bureaucracy and political elites; and (2) how to incentivise district-level field staff and school principals and teachers, who have to change their ways of working, to implement the innovation? This paper presents an ethnographic study of Pratham, one of the most influential NGOs in the domain of education in India today, which has attracted growing attention for introducing an innovative teaching methodology— Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) – with evidence of improved learning outcomes among primary-school students and adoption by a number of states in India. The case study suggests that while a combination of factors, including evidence of success, ease of method, the presence of a committed bureaucrat, and political opportunity are key to state adoption of an innovation, exposure to ground realities, hand holding and confidence building, informal interactions, provision of new teaching resources, and using existing lines of communication are core to ensuring the co-operation of those responsible for actual implementation. The Pratham case, however, also confirms existing concerns that even when NGO-led innovations are successfully implemented at a large scale, their replication across the state and their sustainability remain a challenge. Embedding good practice takes time; the political commitment leading to adoption of an innovation is often, however, tied to an immediate political opportunity being exploited by the political elites. Thus, when political opportunity rather than a genuine political will creates space for adoption of an innovation, state support for that innovation fades away before the new ways of working can replace the old habits. In contexts where states lack political will to improve learning outcomes, NGOs can only hope to make systematic change in state systems if, as in the case of Pratham, they operate as semi-social movements with large cadres of volunteers. The network of volunteers enables them to slow down and pick up again in response to changing political contexts, instead of quitting when state actors withdraw. Involving the community itself does not automatically lead to greater political accountability. Time-bound donor-funded NGO projects aiming to introduce innovation, however large in scale, simply cannot succeed in bringing about systematic change, because embedding change in state institutions lacking political will requires years of sustained engagement.

**Keywords:** NGOs; Innovation; Building State Capacity; Pratham; Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)



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## **Introduction**

The importance of using direct routes of accountability, whereby the public holds the first-line service providers accountable for delivery of a service in contexts where indirect routes of accountability that require political representatives to be held accountable are weak, has led to increased focus on understanding the role that communities, parents, and non-state actors can play in improving the quality of education in state schools (WB 2004; Kingdon et al. 2014; Hickey and Hossain 2019; Watkins and Ashforth 2019). Development agencies have thus invested in programmes aimed at building the capacity of communities to monitor teacher performance more effectively in state schools (Hickey and Hossain 2019). A related response has been to encourage state machinery to adopt innovative methods trialled by NGOs that are seen to improve learning outcomes. The assumption is that, led by dynamic leaders and working closely with the community, NGOs are more able than state machinery to trial new ways of working. Yet it is also widely recognised that evidence of success alone does not guarantee state adoption and the long-term implementation of NGO-led innovation (Bano 2012; Mansuri and Rao 2013). Pratham, which is one of the most visible NGOs in the domain of education in India today, presents one of the rare case studies to identify the factors that can make states adopt NGO-led innovation and ensure its successful implementation. Its proposed methodology of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) has proved effective in improving learning outcomes in primary-school children in Indian state schools and has been adopted by a number of states in India. This paper represents a case study of Pratham's experience of working with governments in a number of Indian states.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 1 situates Pratham's case within existing literature. Section 2 introduces Pratham, its different modes of working, and details of the TaRL methodology. Section 3 explains the research methodology. Section 4 presents an analysis of the factors that facilitate the adoption of innovation within government agencies, but also notes challenges to sustaining political commitment for state-wide replication and sustainability. Section 5 explains the factors important to winning the co-operation of the district-government field staff and school teachers and principals to implement the innovation. Section 6 captures the limited reach of the community, despite Pratham's mobilisation, to hold anyone else accountable, apart from the school teachers and school principals. The concluding section summarises the core findings.

## **Section 1: NGOs, Innovation, and State Adoption: The Framework**

NGOs' ability to come up with innovative solutions to address educational challenges faced by many developing countries began to draw attention from the late 1980s onwards, as NGOs such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) started to win international attention for introducing low-cost community schooling models, which by offering flexible school hours, multi-grade teaching involving training a teacher from within the community, and condensing the primary-school curriculum were able to bring education to an increasing number of children, especially girls. From their initial focus on increasing access within marginalised and poor communities, in recent years – due to a growing recognition of the need to improve the quality of learning in state schools – NGOs are now equally experimenting with mechanisms that can help to improve learning outcomes. The traditional reasons why NGOs are perceived to be good at innovation is that they are led by dynamic leaders who often have relevant technical expertise and are genuinely committed to finding a solution (Edwards and Hulme 1995). They work closely with local communities and thus acquire local knowledge, adjusting to it instead of imposing a predesigned model from the top. Normally working with limited resources (unless funded by a major development agency), NGOs are forced to think out of the box to identify low-cost solutions (Edwards and Hulme 1995). NGOs engaged in the

education sector thus reflect what Pritchett (2013) refers to as the 'starfish' style of educational ecosystem, which develops in response to the local realities, instead of the 'spider' style of educational ecosystem that imposes a standard framework across all contexts, as is the case with the government education bureaucracies.

While NGOs are credited with finding innovative solutions, the feasibility of their models to operate at a large scale, however, remains a concern (Bano 2012 and 2017). Further, large-scale implementation of any innovation requires its embedding within the state educational bureaucracy, as state schools remain the primary providers of education in most contexts, despite steady growth in the share of private schools; further, state schools cater to the poorest and most marginalised segments of the population. Most NGOs, however, struggle to convince governments to adopt their innovative models. In cases where they do succeed, often a major development agency is leading the state-NGO collaboration; but time-bound incentives offered by that development partner lead government actors to co-operate with the NGO only while the funding lasts. Cases like that of Pratham, where the NGO does engage with development agencies but is not reliant for its core activities on one major donor and is able to build partnerships with a number of state actors across a number of different states, are thus rare. In most cases, the government agencies commit their own funds to the adoption of the TaRL model when entering into a partnership with Pratham. In fact, Pratham now mostly works with states where government actors approach it, instead of actively approaching the government in a bid to develop partnerships.

Existing literature on education policy adoption and implementation provides some useful clues to the factors that facilitate these processes. The literature on policy adoption has come to indicate the importance of working with dynamic policy makers and bureaucrats who have an ideological commitment to reform and are willing to work against the dominant consensus to bring change (Mangla 2018): individuals whom Grindle (2004), in her influential study on educational reforms in Mexico, called 'policy entrepreneurs'. We find evidence in support of this argument in the case of Pratham, whereby the steady expansion of its activities in Bihar, was a result of active engagement by both the 'policy entrepreneurs' and the 'practice entrepreneurs': individuals who lobbied for the TaRL approach to be adopted and those who played a key role in working out the practical details of embedding this innovation in the state system. The beginning of work in Bihar in 2005, had much to do with the presence of a dynamic bureaucrat at the district level who approached Pratham with a request for support in a few districts and worked closely with it to see how the government can adopt Pratham's approach. It was the evidence of success gathered in those early districts that a few years later led to the model being endorsed by the Chief Minister, leading to plans for its replication across the state. Yet Pratham's experience in Bihar also shows that when existing political settlements are not in favour of genuine reform, introducing pro-poor outcomes, even in the presence of committed bureaucrats, remains a challenge. The role of bureaucrats is also often limited due to frequent transfers. The Bihar government's failure to renew its programmes with Pratham since 2018 shows that when political elites lack the ideological commitment or incentives to introduce pro-poor reform, i.e. when there is no political will, then the innovation loses its backing as soon as the immediate political interests of the politicians concerned are served. At the same time, Pratham's experience also supports findings in existing studies that show that the expectations placed on NGOs to mobilise communities to hold governments accountable are exaggerated. Pratham programmes covered during the fieldwork, which did have elements of community mobilisation, were indeed effective in empowering parents to hold teachers and principals in state schools more accountable, but there was no evidence that the parents or communities were even attempting to check the performance of district government officials

or political elites. NGOs thus seem more able to strengthen a community's ability to pursue direct routes of accountability, but not the indirect routes.

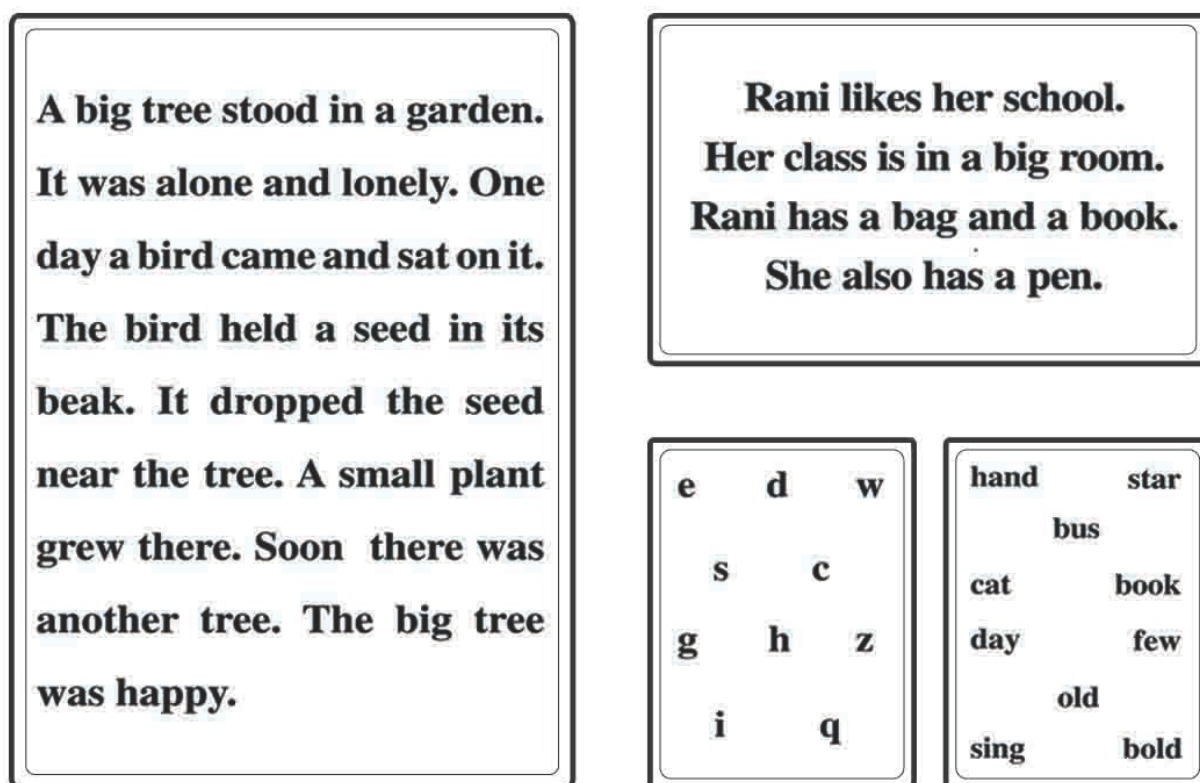
Finally, Pratham's decision to remain engaged in Bihar while the state has withdrawn from active co-operation despite more than a decade of working together also accords with the existing debates in the literature. One of the major themes of research on NGOs today is their heavy reliance on donor-funded projects in which they lose their own innovative agency and become mere implementers. In a major review of studies on community participation and development, Mansuri and Rao (2013) have demonstrated how organic participation driven from below, as opposed to induced participation led by an international development agency, yields much more tangible development outcomes. Pratham's style of working ensures that, even when engaging with donor-funded programmes or drawing on donor funding, its programmes do not become subordinated within a specific donor programme. It is thus able to set its own agenda with the state agency, which normally funds the actual costs of the partnerships forged with Pratham. In general, in line with what is expected of NGOs, the Pratham model is low-cost, which makes it easy for the state to finance its adoption. Pratham also actively recruits volunteers to act as teachers in its programmes and help with other roles. These volunteers help to ensure that Pratham can stay engaged with the state even when formal partnership contracts with the state are not renewed due to a changed political climate. This ensures that instead of completely withdrawing during periods of low activity, Pratham stays engaged with the community in one form or another, waiting for the next political opportunity to arise. Taking account of the political climate and not quitting is thus an important part of the process of ensuring that an innovation once adopted by the state is properly embedded.

The next section introduces Pratham, the types of partnership that it forms with the state, and the main innovation that it introduced to improve learning outcomes among children in state schools in India for which it is today widely acclaimed: Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL).

## **Section 2. Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL): A Case of Successful Innovation**

Established in 1994, Pratham is an NGO with 26 years of experience of working towards the goal of improving education outcomes in Indian state schools. In 2005, it established a research and advocacy branch, ASER, which produces the country-wide Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2005–2014), which is led by ordinary citizens. This household survey reaches between 600,000 and 700,000 children every year across rural India and provides district- and state-level estimates of proficiency in basic reading and arithmetic. Over the last 10 years, through ASER and *Read India*—Pratham's flagship instructional programme—the organisation has been attempting to improve the learning levels of children in government schools. The scale of its operations can be assessed from that fact that Pratham has a staff of around 6,000 people.

At the heart of Pratham's work is the Read India Campaign, which was introduced to improve within 50 days the literacy and numeracy levels of students in Grades 3–5 who lacked foundational skills. The technique introduced to develop these skills is called Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), also known as CAMaL (Combined Activities for Maximised Learning on the ground). The focus of this approach is to ensure that children are being taught at their appropriate level of comprehension, instead of focusing on completing the standard curriculum for that grade. The basic assessment tools are designed to be extremely simply (see Figure 1) and used to determine a child's level of reading and numeracy skills; children are grouped by level rather than grade.



**Figure 1. TaRL reading assessment tool for English**

The assessment tool assesses a child's ability to recognise letters, read everyday simple words, and read a short four-line paragraph and a longer eight- to ten-sentence story. Before starting to teach a group of children organised by level, the instructor – either a local volunteer or a qualified teacher – ensures that he or she spends some time with each child, to make them feel comfortable and to assess how they read.

This helps to build the child's comfort level with the instructor, while giving the teacher an idea of each child's level of abilities. The teaching itself is focused on getting the children to do a combination of activities (such as listening, reading, writing) around a specific task or activity simultaneously. Its reading methodology has been described by some observers as a combination of phonetic methods and whole-language recognition (Banerji and Madhav 2016: 461). Children hear stories and discuss them, then undertake mind-mapping activities and are encouraged to put their thoughts on paper, instead of focusing too much on grammar and spelling. As Banerji and Madhav (2016: 463) note:

In a nutshell, the key elements of the 'Read India' teaching–learning methodology include clearly articulated achievable goals, focussed time for helping children 'catch up', grouping children by level, group work, appropriate methods and materials for each level, plenty of reading material at the children's level, and simple tools to track progress and give attention to children who need help the most.

TaRL methodology also attempts to equip parents (often illiterate) to monitor the learning process of their child by providing a visual guide showing the levels that a child needs to reach. In literacy, the highest level to reach is the ability to read a full story; in mathematics it is the

ability to solve two-digit numerical subtraction problems with borrowing. This focus on one-to-one assessment is unique to the TaRL approach, especially in the Indian context, where the annual academic year starts with a routine insistence on following the prescribed textbook, rather than providing material that matches a child's level of reading or mathematical abilities. In terms of implementing this methodology, Pratham works directly with the communities as well as with the state agencies. When working directly with a community, 'Learning Camps' of 6 to 10 days are organised in the local school or community. Drawing on volunteers from the community who are trained to use TaRL assessment tools and teaching methods, these camps are repeated several times at the same site during a year. When working with the government, the government tends to pay for all materials, and Pratham staff train government bureaucrats to become the 'Leaders of Practice' who are to train the actual teachers. As part of their training they have to attend practice classes for 20 days in government schools, to try out the Pratham model before going on to train government-school teachers.

Rukmini and Madhav, the two key figures behind Pratham and *Read India*, note that when they established Pratham in 1994 there were already many initiatives concerned about low learning attainment in Indian schools, such as the state-led Activity Based Learning (ABL) programme or the Learning Guarantee Program led by Azim Premji University. Thus, from its very inception, Pratham's mission – 'every child in school and learning well' (Banerji and Madhav 2016: 456) – emphasised not merely access to education but also access to quality learning. Initially, they worked directly with the communities, especially in the slums of Mumbai. Gradually frustrated by the slow pace of learning among children, it realised the importance of innovation and experimentation. It therefore experimented with methods to accelerate learning, especially for children who were already in Grade 3 or above. By 2003, Pratham had developed a 'learning to read' technique that could be used even by relatively less educated community volunteers to teach children to read in six to eight weeks. The focus of this technique was on identifying the processes that enable children to learn; the teaching techniques used were actually quite simple. Equipped with this approach, Pratham entered the policy-reform arena to influence teaching practices in state schools. Today, Pratham's direct instructional work reaches close to one million children annually across 20 states (Banerji and Madhav 2016: 457).

### **Section 3. Methodology**

The fieldwork for this paper was conducted in three states where Pratham has had a long-term presence: Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. In each state Pratham is involved in different forms of government partnership, ranging from 'early years' programmes, direct partnerships in schools (where Pratham staff themselves teach in schools), to wide-scale government partnerships across states (where Pratham staff train government administrators who in turn train teachers). Despite the variations in methodology and target audience, central features of TaRL informed all these programmes. The four programmes observed as part of the fieldwork were as follows.

*Early Childhood Programme, New Delhi:* Working with pre-school children in the existing government Anganwadi programme. Each teacher is given a tablet for one week and is made responsible for encouraging the children to play with this new technology.

*ITC Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh:* Remedial classes taken by Pratham staff in schools at special times. ITC, a commercial company, has adopted all government schools within a 5- kilometre radius from the factory, and among other community welfare activities it has also partnered

with Pratham to support the introduction of TaRL methodology in these schools and to increase community ownership of children's education.

*JEEViKA programme in Bihar:* JEEViKA, a poverty-reduction programme implemented by the Government of Bihar with the aid of the World Bank, strives to create sustainable livelihoods through self-managed community institutions, greater access to social protection (including food security), and stronger voices in the community. Pratham runs a 10-week programme that helps mothers to learn skills they need to facilitate their children's learning, raise awareness about learning levels, and hold schools accountable.

*Bihar Education Project Council (BEPC), districts of Patna and Nalanda, Bihar:* The programme provides for remedial classes taken by trained teachers, who are trained by government administrators, who in turn are trained by Pratham staff. The MoU '... commits the two parties for implementation of programs to improve basic learning of children taught by government school teachers over a three-year period (2018-21)'. Under the MoU, BEPC and Pratham are to collaborate to meet the following objectives: (1) significantly and substantially improve learning levels in basic reading and arithmetic for children in Std. III-V; (2) introduce and sustain teaching-learning practices in schools such that every child acquires durable foundational skills which help them to progress satisfactorily in school in future; (3) build the monitoring, mentoring, and academic support capacities of the government supervising cadre for effective implementation of the programme. This government supervising cadre consists of BRPs (Block Resource Persons) and CRCCs (Cluster Resource Centre Coordinators).

At the outset in-depth interviews were first conducted with Pratham staff. These interviews lasted from one to three hours, or sometimes were conducted over the span of a couple of days. The positions held by the people interviewed included State Heads, Programme Heads, analysts, Pratham teachers, and local Pratham staff at block and district levels. These interviews were conducted in many locations. Most were held in Pratham offices, but some took place on the way to field sites in cars, or while walking. The interviews that were done during travel were often more personal, whereas the ones conducted in offices helped to reflect Pratham's ideology as an organisation. The interviews that took place during field visits were considerably different from the in-depth interviews with Pratham staff. During the visits to day-care centres and schools, the interviews with teachers and principals were often interrupted by school activities or administrative work and were more like an informal conversation. Similarly, interviews with mothers' groups were free flowing, due to the nature of the programme, which was full of games and activities.

Interviews with local government administrators were more formal, as time had been allotted out of the official working day. These interviews were conducted in group settings (with government supervising cadre including the Cluster Resource Coordinators (CRCCs), Block Resource Persons (BRPs), and the Block Education Officer (BEO), with higher-level administrators chairing the meeting but the lower-level government administrators actually responding to most of the questions. Visits were also made to private homes to meet parents. In such instances, the interviews were semi-structured, where the same questions were put to all parents, most of whom were mothers. Despite their semi-structured nature, the interviews often had to be adapted to the particular socio-religious context, the gender of the respondent, and the level of comfort between the interviewer, the respondent, and the Pratham staff member who was facilitating the meeting.



While in the field, ethnographic observations were made about the way the Pratham team engaged with all these actors. Since the field sites included small rooms used as day-care centres, government buildings for primary schools, informal school settings (such as an abandoned building converted into a classroom), outdoor spaces where mothers' meetings or children's group study sessions were convened, and, lastly, private homes, it was possible to observe a wide range of interactions between Pratham staff, government officials, community members, and parents.

## **Section 4. Factors Shaping Adoption**

Fieldwork across the three states indicates the importance of four factors in influencing the government to adopt innovative education models introduced by NGOs: evidence of success; clarity of objectives and ease of method; presence of a bureaucrat committed to reform; and political opportunity.

### *4.1. Evidence of success*

The success of Pratham's TaRL methodology in improving learning outcomes is easy to see in the ample amount of direct evidence on the ground and external reports that document its success. Bureaucrats are encouraged by Pratham staff to visit their field sites and see for themselves how TaRL methodology is implemented, and the results that it generates. As one of the Regional Heads at Pratham explained:

Initially, they [bureaucrats] were not easily convinced. They were a *sarkari* [government] department and were not too happy about having an external organisation like Pratham coming in and telling them what to do... [But] we always have evidence to back our model, and we could show that learning outcomes can improve with the correct methodology [TaRL] in a short span of time. In the past, after our first team was formed, bureaucrats at the Education Director's level came and saw our work in Patna. They actually went into the field to see if we were really doing any work or whether it was all talk. After going into the field, they understood two things: 1. that our method was working with children and 2. Even their counterparts [i.e. other local government officials] supported us and our work. For example, the BEP (government officers) told them about our work in Nalanda in a lot of detail and with a lot of enthusiasm.

Not only does first-hand experience help to convince bureaucrats, but it helps to narrow the gap between on-paper government programmes and on-the-ground realities, leaving bureaucrats more invested in the project. As the same Pratham official added:

The State Project Director realised that his thinking and our doing aligned quite a bit and together we could really improve learning outcomes in Bihar's schools.

Similarly, Banerji (2015) notes that the Chief Minister of Bihar was convinced of the need to replicate Pratham's activities across a number of districts after seeing the 2012 results from ASER and evidence of the success of Pratham's ongoing work in Jehanabad district.

### *4.2. Clarity of objectives and ease of method*

Indian bureaucracy likes clarity. As Nayanika Mathur explores in her book, *Paper Tiger*, constant disagreements among government actors in the implementation of NREGA, a national rural employment scheme, and the attempt to be transparent led to an overwhelming amount

of paperwork for bureaucrats, making some of them averse to implementing the policy in the first place. Mathur (2015: 30) notes, ‘It is the “transparent-making documents” demanded by NREGA that were, ironically enough, making the law difficult to implement.’ This challenge of getting the state institutions to actually deliver in India is captured in Pritchett’s (2009) classification of India as a *flailing state*— ‘*a nation-state in which the head, that is the elite institutions at the national (and in some states) level remain sound and functional but that this head is no longer reliably connected via nerves and sinews to its own limbs.*’ As he notes, many of the field level agents of the state, such as teachers, are increasingly not in the control of the administration at the national or state level. Thus, embedding innovation at the ground level in such an institutional framework is a serious challenge. One way Pratham has addressed these challenges is to make the MoUs signed with the state governments very detailed. Pratham’s TaRL, with its clear goals, methods, and expected outcomes, and its clear assignment of roles, makes it easy for bureaucrats to imagine its implementation, without too much effort. At the same time, the actual method is easy enough for even ordinary volunteers to follow it. This is encouraging for the bureaucrats who, as was often mentioned in the field, lack trust in the abilities of the field staff and the teachers. In the words of one of the Programme Heads at Pratham Bihar: ‘They [bureaucrats] think that teachers will not be able to understand or implement any systematic changes. They think the CRCCs will do no work and the teachers are incapable of implementing changes.’

Pratham’s early experiences with TaRL revealed that the methodology could be adopted not only by Pratham staff but by a diverse range of people. As a Pratham official explained, ‘... we realised that not only Pratham’s volunteers, but even other people could be trained to use CaMAL (TaRL)’. TaRL does not require any long-term or complicated courses: the training lasts for a minimum of one week, and even untrained individuals, with no previous experience in the realm of education, could learn the basics of TaRL. For example, it was observed during fieldwork in Gaya, Bihar that mothers taking part in Pratham’s JEEViKA programme who were unable to read or write could use the basic TaRL tool to test children’s progress. Hence, TaRL’s ease of implementation appeals to many bureaucrats who may not trust the ability of their lower-level colleagues or the teachers to successfully learn and teach new education methodologies at the ground level.

Moore (2019), in his paper, *Creative Destruction or Idiot Winds: Schumpeterian Theory Meets the Educational Sector in Developing Countries*, notes that increasing budgets alone will not help address the learning crisis in developing countries. Increased budgetary allocations are good for improving access but for improving productivity and quality of educational services, innovation is required. As he argues, ‘we need to innovate widely and quickly to find better ways of providing educational services to produce better educational outcomes,’ (Moore 2019: 3). He notes that innovations for improving learning outcomes could be tried in a number of areas: developing new teaching methods using digital technology, finding ways to involve the parents in the learning process, offering better teacher incentives, etc. The key thus is to find out which innovations will have maximum impact and would also diffuse rapidly across the system. The experience of Pratham with TaRL shows that improving learning outcomes at the primary level does not require innovating very unique teaching methodologies. TaRL’s key strength is that it offers teaching tools, which are very simple to use.

#### 4.3. Presence of a committed bureaucrat

Existing studies have highlighted the importance of committed bureaucrats in the adoption of pro-poor policy reforms, as well as their implementation (Grindle 2004; Mangla 2015 and

2018); the case of Pratham demonstrates the same crucial factor. Pratham's government partnerships in Bihar started on the initiation of a district magistrate (DM) who was already concerned about low learning outcomes and was looking for solutions. It was he who approached Pratham, which by then was already working with communities in Bihar, with an invitation to introduce the TaRL approach in the schools in his district. It was the success of Pratham's work in that district that laid the ground for convincing the Chief Minister of the value of the Pratham's methodology. The DM played a critical role in convincing the Chief Minister of the success of the programme. As a Pratham official explained:

As an organisation, I think we view certain programmes as successful when both our vision and goals align with the government. What was particularly important in Jehanabad was the fact that the government was already fighting this issue with learning outcomes. And they felt that we were an organisation that understood where they were coming from. By the time we entered the picture, the DM had understood that in one class there were different children with varied learning levels. So how could one teacher teach all of these children? So the DM was already on a mission to tackle such hurdles.

Further, convincing a key bureaucrat is important not only for the promulgation of a programme but also to ensure its implementation by lower-level administrative officials. 'Pressure from the top' was repeatedly identified as one of the main ways to sustain the 'buy-in' at lower levels of the bureaucracy and among the teachers. As one of Pratham's Regional Leaders explained, '... because their own bosses were convinced, [lower bureaucrats] were automatically persuaded to accept and implement our model'

#### 4.4. Political opportunity

In 2012, the Chief Minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, met with Rukmini Banerji, the CEO of Pratham, to finalise the beginning of a state-wide government partnership known as *Mission Gunwatta* (Mission Quality). Nitish Kumar came to power in 2005, replacing the previous government that had been in power since 1990. Nitish Kumar won the elections on a mandate of 'infrastructure-based development'. There was also a strong focus on education, especially in terms of school infrastructure and improving access. As one Pratham official explains:

When Nitish Kumar came to power, there was a lot of scope for improvement in all facets across Bihar. The mandate he came out with in his first term focused on infrastructure. This has certainly improved. People who had issues going to training centres in the past can now easily travel... Earlier, the resources were very less in Bihar for education... how things have changed since Nitish Kumar came to power. His first priority was to invest in and for the people of Bihar. Education, health and then infrastructure (road and electricity) were his principal mandates.

His first term in office, thus, focused on the agenda of massive infrastructure investments, the building of schools, increasing the number of teachers in Bihar, and initiating incentive-based schemes to increase the number of school-going children. Such an investment in infrastructure development and getting children to school instead of focusing on learning outcomes was justifiable at this point given that under the previous government of Lalu Prasad Yadav, Bihar had come to seriously lag behind in basic education indicators, compared to other states in India. The importance accorded to ASER reports, Pratham staff felt, was evidence of Nitish Kumar's commitment to reform. In their view, there was a causal link between the ASER report and Nitish Kumar's focus on out-of-school children. As the Pratham official noted, 'The

government mirrored the claim made by ASER. Hence, the big focus turned to those children who were out of school.’ It is this evidence-based development to which Pratham staff attribute their good relationship with the CM. The same focus on evidence led him to emphasise improving learning outcomes during the tenure of his second government, which started in 2012. When writing about the CM reaching out to Pratham during Mission Gunwatta, Banerji states, ‘... there was an unprecedented openness in accepting problems and welcoming those who wanted to help’, which was built during their past relationships with the government’s ‘comprehensive strategy to mainstream out of school children’ (Banerji 2015: 23).

However, Nitish Kumar's commitment did not prove sustainable. When it came to making investments in quality improvements, where the immediate outcomes were less visible and the political dividends less explicit, then interventions that promised immediate political gains at election time (such as building of a school or provision of bicycles for the female students), the political will required to sustain efforts aimed at improving actual learning outcomes was missing. Banerji (2015: 25) has documented in detail the factors leading to gradual loss of focus by the Bihar government:

.... many political and perhaps populist decisions have been taken that will have an impact on the school system in years to come. For example, contract teachers went on strike for two months, bringing schools in the state to a standstill. Eventually the government gave in and agreed to the demands of the teachers for higher payment and regularization. Student entitlements, which are usually distributed in the winter months, have been distributed early in the school year. Attendance norms have been dispensed with. Promises for building high schools in every panchayat are being made. These major decisions about inputs, entitlements and job security which are being taken at the present time will have long-lasting implications for the schooling ecosystem. However, in the rush to have popular measures in place – perhaps ones that are calculated to get votes, there is no mention or action announced for improving basic reading or arithmetic for Bihar’s children.

During the fieldwork, one of the senior Pratham officials shared a similar concern about the lack of political will:

In my opinion, apart from buy-in, the amount of proactive action is lacking and may not be a top priority as it was before. Our priority has always been learning but that may not be the case with our CM and other big bureaucrats who are implementing the policy. If the CM wants to focus more on ensuring that children get money, then no matter what you do, the number one order is something else and not learning outcomes. We would like some help on how to convince such people who do not prioritise learning outcomes. Essentially, we are also interested in understanding how to ensure that they take out time from their other tasks for children’s basic learning.

The experience of Pratham thus shows that political backing is indeed essential to widespread replication of a NGO-led innovation by the state, but for such backing to be sustainable it is important that the state has the political will, and is not just cashing in on an opportunity to achieve short-term political gains.

## **Section 5. Factors Shaping Implementation**

Even when adopted, innovations are not guaranteed to succeed unless the ground staff responsible for their implementation are convinced of their importance. Therefore, apart from

winning the co-operation of higher-level key officials, Pratham consciously works towards convincing local administrators and teachers who are responsible for policy implementation. Pratham staff appear to use five strategies to win the co-operation of teachers and local government administrators: practice classes for Master Trainers (described below) and introductions to the realities on the ground; hand holding and confidence building; maintaining an informal mode of interaction; provision of new teaching resources; and using existing lines of communication.

### *5.1 Practice classes and exposure to ground reality*

Some government partnerships see Pratham staff directly teaching children, but many partnerships, especially long-term partnerships, involve the training of local administrators (such as Cluster Coordinators) who subsequently go on to train government teachers in Pratham's TaRL methodology. These individuals are known as Master Trainers (MT). The logic behind building this new cadre of Pratham-trained government administrators is to ensure the long-term integration of TaRL into the workings of government, so that even without Pratham trainers there is an established cadre that can train teachers in TaRL methods long after the government partnership has ended. MTs, thus, ensure a more lasting impact for the partnership, as through them TaRL has a higher chance of being integrated into the government's main teaching activities.

The focus of these trainings is to teach MTs how to use TaRL, in particular how to group by level, conduct assessments, monitor the teachers and students, and provide academic support. An important component of these trainings is *practice classes*. Practice classes last from anywhere from 7 days to 20 days, during which the MT goes to a school and attempts to teach children foundational skills using the TaRL methodology. These classes not only aid MTs in understanding TaRL better but also play a role in motivating administrators to work towards successfully implementing the programme. They enable MTs to witness the realities of government schools and help them to see that TaRL methodology is successful on the ground.

As one Pratham official noted, often local government administrators spend little time interacting with ground realities. Much of their time is spent filing documents in the local government office, or going into the field to update basic checklists on infrastructure and attendance, which is done during pre-scheduled school visits. As a result, local administrators' imagined realities often do not accord with the ground realities of schools. He further added that during the *Pado Jehanabad* government partnership in Bihar:

... Most Cluster Coordinators thought that the learning levels were good, especially considering high attendance rates...Cluster Coordinators thought that 75% attendance translated into good learning outcomes. So then we used our ASER tool [it is the same tool as used in TaRL] to see whether their perceptions match with reality. For this phase of the programme, we trained the coordinators to conduct the test themselves. The result of this exercise was that the cluster coordinators, along with our teams, realised that there was a huge difference between perceptions and on-ground reality. In those schools where they thought that 90% of the children could read basic Hindi, we found that only 30% of the children could.

The same official noted that such an exercise resulted in local administrators feeling a greater sense of responsibility for, and empathy towards, the students, particularly since frequent visits to the same schools and directly teaching the same set of children created a certain bond between the local administrators and the students.

### 5.2. *Handholding and confidence building*

The beginning of any programme was often met with hesitation and reluctance by both teachers and local administrators. Apart from practice classes, Pratham adopts a policy of ‘handholding’ throughout the duration of the government partnership. This ensures that the programme is on track in terms of both timeline and the proper implementation of the TaRL methodology. With constant support and monitoring, Pratham can maintain a sense of pressure to ensure that the programme is generating the desired outcomes, and it can keep motivating the ground-level government employees or resolve any issues that arise immediately. Hence, teachers and administrators do not feel that they have been left on their own in the deep end, but rather they have a safety net they can fall back on. This is important, as often issues tend to remain unresolved, or teachers and administrators are too hesitant to reach out to higher-level bureaucrats for fear of being reprimanded. Pratham thus builds in a regular monitoring schedule to monitor the work on the ground. As explained by a Pratham official:

On the ground, what we could see was that our supervision made a difference. It is natural that people get more motivated when there is someone pushing them. And in some districts there was no one [from the government] to encourage the on-the-ground administrators and teachers apart from us.

### 5.3. *Informal modes of interaction and letting local teachers and administrators take credit*

Fieldwork further revealed the importance of personal relationships between Pratham staff and teachers and local administrators. Creating a bond with ground-level administrators was identified by Pratham staff as extremely important: ‘*Dosti, mauka, jadu*’ (friendship, opportunity, and then magic), as one Pratham official explained. A core foundation of this relationship was the fact that state-level Pratham staff were predominantly from the state where they worked. Hence, they had a better understanding of the local culture of work, and the language, and they could relate to shared norms and experiences. This helped them to connect with government administrators and teachers better, and integrate Pratham into the government framework with greater ease.

Observations during fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh’s Saharanpur illustrated how Pratham staff created an informal environment with teachers and government officials, one built on respect and camaraderie rather than an environment where Pratham was seen as a top-down technocratic organisation. Pratham staff would praise the teacher with great enthusiasm and would often mention the individual (teacher or government administrator) when recounting incidents in their presence, thus ascribing a value to the teacher or administrator.

When asked why Pratham staff agreed with everything the teachers said, they responded: ‘we need to agree with what they say’:

Even though we get official permissions, we are still a private organisation. Why would they listen to us? It also depends on the individual teacher and their mood. They might come to school having fought with their family at home and then they take their frustration out in the school.

Hence, to ensure easy entry into the system, Pratham staff tried hard to maintain a relationship of equal power with government counterparts. By doing so, Pratham’s government partnerships

were more naturally incorporated and accepted into the existing government structure. One of Pratham's female field monitors explained the relationship with teachers in greater detail:

It takes time in explaining and building a relationship with teachers. Especially since these teachers are post-graduates, they have passed an examination, and we are merely an organisation there to support them. When we say that we can get a child to read in 40 days, they find it hard to believe as they have been spending an entire year with these children with hardly any progress. But when we show them the data that illustrates a change in children's learning abilities using TaRL, they tend to warm up to us and then it is easier for us to work in the school the next year. Building a relationship with teachers comes with many issues. The places where we have been working for a long time would readily agree to initiate any programme we suggest. They would never turn us down. The newer schools take more time. Sometimes we also have new Pratham staff working with us. It also takes a long time for them to understand how Pratham works. It also took me a very long time to understand Pratham and its work. In our team, we have staff that is as young as 22–23 years old. We have to teach them how to interact with people, in particular important and experienced government officials and teachers. If such young Pratham staff go up to an older teacher and ask them to help with our programme, they would not listen. So not only do we need to understand our own people but we also need to understand how government teachers think and react.

As explained by this respondent, motivating and convincing teachers played a big part in ensuring the success of government partnerships, especially those partnerships that required Pratham staff to be regularly present in schools. She was also of the view that sustained efforts pay off; when the same staff interact with the same teachers over a prolonged period of time, trust and understanding is established between the two parties, which makes introducing and implementing change smoother.

At the same time, a different dynamic was observed in Bihar. In Saharanpur in UP, the government partnership required a direct presence of Pratham staff in schools. On the other hand, in the government partnership observed in Bihar (*BEPC*), Pratham's staff were mainly involved in training and monitoring government administrators to use TaRL methodology, rather than having direct contact with teachers. Hence, the interaction between Pratham staff and teachers was very minimal and their main point of contact was local government administrators. During a meeting between the regional head of Pratham and these local government administrators, the method of interaction was again quite informal. However, towards the end, when district administrators asked for advice on how to improve their work, Pratham's regional head exerted a degree of authority not shown by Pratham staff observed in the schools in Saharanpur. He took on a confident and aggressively motivating role, which clearly prompted the district administrators to look up to him as a specialist. Thus, the dynamics of interaction between the Pratham staff and the government district officials and teachers were normally always informal and supportive, but whether Pratham staff act submissively or boldly depends on the demands of a specific context. Trying to make teachers adapt their teaching habits requires a more submissive and ongoing supportive attitude, whereas when motivating the district administrators a more confident and assertive but supportive attitude pays off.

#### *5.4. Provision of new resources*

Pratham's emphasis on introducing new technologies and Teaching-Learning-Material through these government partnerships also appears to help motivate both teachers and government

administrators. One such example of a new technology seen in the field was the new app called *Pradigi*. The district administrators took pride in showing the App to the research team, and during the fieldwork many government employees, including the teachers, said that Pratham taught them a lot, and each day was a new experience.

#### 5.5. *Use of official lines of communication and implementation*

Lastly, Pratham provides a supplement, rather than an alternative, to government modes of working. This is important when dealing with local government administration, as well as with teachers. Pratham does not try to replace government officials or take away their responsibilities.

Pratham approaches local government administrators and teachers through official lines of communication. It does not circumvent the government systems, but uses them for their mutual benefit. As one Pratham official explained, official letters from top bureaucrats create a sense of seriousness and pressure.

The message was very loud and clear and came from within their own system. I wouldn't call it pressure but it is more like a push.

Without a letter, people from the government do not even lift a finger.....the people would only work if they received the order from above.

Using official lines of communication during the promulgation and implementation process not only builds pressure but further demarcates lines of accountability and responsibility for both parties. This is especially apparent in the clear division of work between Pratham staff and government officials, which is maintained through official MoUs. The need to avoid taking responsibility away from the relevant government actors was explained by a Pratham official in these words:

If we send more people from Pratham to a district, the government starts to think that this is Pratham's programme or work. In our previous and even existing partnerships where we have more Pratham staff in each district, the responsibility gets easily shifted on to Pratham staff rather than the teachers. Sometimes, what happens is that we see the other teacher implementing our method incorrectly and we stop them and take over. This way, we end up taking more responsibility than we should. And then the government administrators also take a step back. This is why we sent less people to these districts to ensure that the government does not detach itself from the programme.

Further, following official lines of communication was seen to build greater official ownership of the programme. In Saharanpur, most individuals in the community had never heard of Pratham but were vaguely aware of a new government programme that was aiding their children's basic learning. Similarly, in Bihar's BEPC programme, despite Teaching-Learning-Material having Pratham's name on it, teachers could not answer questions such as, 'Who is Pratham?' Most of the time, the answers would include references to school textbooks having Pratham's name on it, instead of a clear understanding of Pratham's involvement at the training level, or even in terms of the formation of the TaRL methodology. Some teachers even went on to say that TaRL was a government methodology, created solely for this programme.



Yet Pratham staff members were unfazed by such comments. One could interpret this as an example of how Pratham implements its ‘supplementary not alternative’ approach, whereby it does not aim to establish its identity distinct from the government when implementing these government partnerships. As one of the senior Pratham officials summed up:

Our mandate is to be supplementary to the government, to strengthen the government in any way that we can. We have to stand behind the government.

## **Section 6. Role of Community Engagement**

Many of Pratham’s initiatives deal with community engagement, particularly encouraging parents to interact with their local school teachers and administration. This is done either through direct methods (such as classes taken with mothers during the JEEViKA programme in Bihar, or the Early Years Anganwadi programme in Delhi) or indirect methods (conversations with parents and teachers), depending on the nature of the government partnership. However, not all government partnerships engage with the community. The BEPC programme in Bihar does little work with the community, and without any direct contact communities tend to have little reason to interact with Pratham’s methodologies. As one of Pratham’s staff members explained:

In some government partnerships, there is not a lot of direct interaction with the community. The community will only talk to you when you go and interact with them and they get to know you well... The community only reacts if we interact with them regularly.

Based on fieldwork with JEEViKA, the Early Years Anganwadi programme in Delhi, and the ITC partnership in Saharanpur, which involved a community component, it is clear that Pratham’s community mobilisation work is geared towards building parental ownership, increasing their aspirations for their child’s future, and holding government school teachers accountable.

### *6.1 Ownership*

Pratham’s community-engaging initiatives work towards creating a communal sense of ‘ownership’ regarding children’s education. In the past, education was thought to be the sole responsibility of government teachers and state schools. During interviews with parents in Saharanpur, it was clear that many low-income parents felt they were in no position to question what happens in state schools, as they were not themselves educated. Pratham tries to change this mind-set. In Saharanpur, Pratham staff would often go door-to-door in the community and initiate conversations on children’s learning levels to encourage parents to track their child’s progress. They would further encourage parents to sit with their children even if they did not understand the work, just to create a supportive environment. Similarly, the JEEViKA government partnership in Bihar tries to increase community engagement and ownership by teaching mothers in Self-Help Groups how to track the basic reading and numeracy levels of a child, using the TaRL tool.

The MoU signed between Pratham and the Government of Bihar describes the programme as:

... a poverty reduction program implemented by the Government of Bihar with the aid of the World Bank. The project aims to empower the rural poor, economically as well as socially. It focuses on women and strives to create sustainable livelihoods through

self-managed community institutions, greater access to social protection (including food security) and stronger voices in the community.

Pratham's role is:

... to create awareness among SHG (Self Help Groups) members regarding learning levels and equip them with the necessary tools to try and improve the same.

The objectives in the MoU are shown below:

## OBJECTIVE

JEEViKA and Pratham propose to jointly implement an intervention with members of Self Help Groups (SHGs) in a set of selected districts across the state, with the aim to **create awareness and empower SHG members to improve learning levels of their children.**

## I. OUTPUTS

The intervention will be carried out by JEEViKA appointed Community Mobilizers (CMs), along with some select and active SHG members and will be overseen by a joint team of Pratham and JEEViKA. As part of the collaboration, the aim will be to achieve the following outputs:

- **Make majority of mothers understand basic reading and arithmetic levels of their children:** Mothers will be oriented on simple tools which they will be encouraged to use to understand learning levels of their children, thus helping create awareness about the status of learning.
- **Enable mothers to have discussions with school actors:** SHG members will be encouraged to make visits to schools and have conversations with school actors such as teachers and head masters on how to improve learning levels of their children.
- **Facilitate activities focusing on basic learning for children:** Mothers will be oriented on activities that can be done with children – either via their own efforts or through the use of volunteers.

## III. OVERVIEW OF APPROACH

Below is a brief overview of the approach that will be followed over the course of the interactions with SHG members:

ELEMENTS OF THE INTERVENTION	
ACTIVITY	DETAILS
CREATING AWARENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introducing the entire intervention to SHG members</li> <li>• Discussing the importance of education and helping members understand the situation regarding their children's learning (for instance making them realize that attending school does not necessarily imply that learning level of children is equivalent to their grade level)</li> <li>• Introducing and demonstrating to members the entire process of testing and assessing children</li> </ul>
INITIATING ACTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging visits to schools (by SHG members), so as to have conversations regarding children's education</li> <li>• Discussing on the need to actively keep track of children's progress, as well as orienting members on activities that can be done with children – either by themselves or by facilitation through volunteers</li> <li>• Conducting village level meetings, so as to create awareness about education across the village as a whole</li> </ul>
ENCOURAGING & EMPOWERING MEMBERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating awareness about Aadhar cards, health and hygiene, etc.</li> <li>• Sharing of experiences of SHG members</li> <li>• Building their confidence by discussing their success stories, as well as, appreciating and encouraging their efforts</li> </ul>

By making mothers more self-reliant, the programme instills confidence in women who had previously avoided participating in their child's learning; now they are equipped with tools to track their child's progress. In addition to testing learning levels, JEEViKA taught mothers fun activities and games which could be used to increase their child's reading and arithmetic levels in the comfort of the home. These 'facilitated activities' were taught in interactive, group settings during the weekly meetings, where each mother participated, practised, and clarified any doubts.

More recently, Pratham has begun using new digital technologies such as tablets. The Early Years Anganwadi programme in Delhi is one such government partnership which uses digital resources to help children learn. Apart from the visible positive impact it has on children's learning, an interesting outcome of this digital initiative is that mothers are now exposed to new forms of learning and can interact and aid their children, even without a formal education. This again helps to create a sense of ownership in guiding their child's education, by giving them authority over the duration or choice of application that the child is using at home. Moreover, resources like tablets are particularly helpful for those parents who find it hard to set aside time and energy for their child's education, as the child needs limited monitoring. Through such methods of learning, the onus of education is not solely on teachers: there is a new communal responsibility for children's education.

### *6.2 Aspirations*

Increased ownership also increases parental aspirations about a child's future. Fundamentally, the increased confidence of parents, especially mothers, suggests a changed mind-set from simply 'receiving' education to 'demanding' education for their children, and in turn demanding better futures for their children. This is evident in the following quotes from interviews with mothers in Saharanpur:

Should we not send her to school? We send her so that she learns something and improves her future prospects. I want her to make something of her life. If I didn't want her to do something with her life I wouldn't send her to a government school and would just keep her at home.

So that my children are educated and successful, I don't want them to be in a situation like mine where I am uneducated. If I was educated maybe I could help teach my children something more. But at least my children can learn something. My days have gone now.

### *6.3 Accountability*

Finally, Pratham's programmes also encourage parents to hold teachers more accountable for providing higher standards of education to their children. For example, in the MoU between JEEViKA and Pratham, there is an entire section dedicated to 'Initiating Action'. By learning to use the TaRL tool to test their child's learning levels, mothers were better equipped to pressure teachers if the children were seen to be lagging behind. Moreover, greater 'ownership' and higher 'aspirations', fostered through community-engagement programmes, naturally made parents more comfortable to demand better learning outcomes from state schools, and subsequently to hold teachers and school administrators 'accountable'. As a mother from Saharanpur said:

I would always think that I would go to the school and complain but I never got the time from household work and did not think they [teachers] would listen to me.

The same mother, when asked 'what do you discuss with teachers now?', responded in a matter-of-fact manner:

I ask them to teach the children well.

This increased confidence was shared during a field visit to a JEEViKA meeting in the Dhanavan, district of Gaya, Bihar, where a mother shared this story:

'You haven't studied, so what are you telling us', the teacher would always tell us. But we should not have to go into schools to make them work, they should be motivated themselves. We don't want to mobilise. Nitish Kumar has done a lot to incentivise education but whether our children are learning or not is another matter altogether. One time the teachers shut the school to host a pooja. So we went to the school and complained to the headmaster. He then reprimanded the teachers. This is what we have to deal with. But our fear of talking to a teacher has now gone as we have learnt how to talk to them.

This incident illustrates how Pratham's focus on learning how to hold people in power accountable aids collective mobilisation. However, based on the fieldwork, it also appears that the reach of the community even when supported by Pratham is limited to holding the teachers accountable – not necessarily the government administrators. More generally, Pratham aims to encourage parents to hold primarily teachers and schools accountable, and does little to hold the wider government administration accountable when it comes to children's education. This links in with the discourse on citizens' rights in India: there seems to be a separation between local communities and the government, whereby parents are more likely to link education directly with teachers rather than contextualise it within a wider nexus involving bureaucrats and politicians.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to map the factors that have enabled Pratham to work across a number of states in India, often in collaboration with the state governments. It has shown that while evidence of success, ease of method, presence of a committed bureaucrat, and political opportunity are key to state adoption of an innovation, exposure to ground realities, hand holding and confidence building, informal interactions, provision of new teaching resources, and using existing lines of communication are key to convincing district government officials and principals and teachers in state schools, who have to adjust their ways of working, to ensure effective implementation of the innovation. More critically, however, the paper shows that in countries where national or regional governments lack an explicit political will to improve learning outcomes in state schools, embedding educational reforms remains a challenge: any openings for large-scale replication of an innovation are, more often than not, tied to a particular political opportunity that the political elites want to exploit; the support for the innovation thus disappears before it has been fully embedded in the state system. In particular with reference to Pratham's experience of working in Bihar for over 15 years, it has also illustrated how, in the absence of a strong political will, it is difficult to embed innovation in state systems on a sustainable basis, even though political elites show initial commitment to its adoption. The attempts by NGOs to mobilise communities to hold government accountable

remain confined to the level of holding teachers and principals accountable; even NGOs like Pratham show limited evidence of successfully mobilising communities to hold the district educational officials or district- or state-level political elites accountable. The question thus is: what should the NGOs do when state actors shift their focus away from agreed priorities?

The Pratham case suggests that having the ability to stay engaged in a state even when the formal partnership with the state seems to come to an end is critical to long-term success. Pratham's team in Bihar thus still remains very active, although for the time being it is more focused on working directly with the communities. This keeps Pratham well positioned to re-engage with the state when the next political opportunity arises. This ability to stay engaged in a large number of states on a long-term basis leads us to identify one of its biggest strengths: namely, its ability to work as a social movement and not as a typical NGO. As one of its staff members said during one interview, 'Pratham is like a movement. It is quite institutional in some ways but what drives people is hard to quantify. People spend their entire lives in the organisation. Our programmes (such as the UP programme) are almost like massive campaigns.' This indeed appears to be true. Pratham's ability to mobilise a large cadre of volunteers to implement TaRL is its core strength; it enables it to work through periods when the state actors prove unpredictable. This ability to mobilise volunteers, which traditionally is seen as the core strength of any civil-society actor, and is a core indicator of social capital (Putnam 1993), is, however, not common to many large development NGOs, which have become heavily donor-dependent (Bano 2012 & 2017). What Mansuri and Rao (2013) defined as organic participation is thus key to understanding Pratham's success as an organisation. This also explains why we repeatedly see that time-bound donor-funded NGO projects aiming to introduce innovation, however large in scale, simply fail to bring about systematic change. Pratham's experience shows that embedding change in state institutions lacking a clear political will, requires years of sustained effort.

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