

Reading is not only for learning purposes but also for fun, entertainment, and healing. Reading helps us learn new words and skills, enables us to think critically, challenges our viewpoints, shows us new perspectives, fuels our imagination, makes us curious and prompts us to explore different beliefs and cultures of the world.

Eklavya Foundation<sup>i</sup> provided sets of children's literature to some Government Primary Schools and Mohalla Learning Activity Centres (MLACs)<sup>ii</sup> located in the rural areas of Pipariya Block, Madhya Pradesh. These sets for classes I-V included, selected Hindi, English, and bilingual storybooks and poems published by different publications, such as Eklavya Publication, Pratham Books, Muskan Foundation, and Ektara Publication.

As part of the MLAC team, we undertook the initiative to build a reading culture among students and teachers at the Government Primary School and the community in Silari, a village in the Pipariya block of Madhya Pradesh.

### Baal Mela for students and teachers

The MLA Centre, which was earlier run at a

volunteer's residence, has now shifted to the government school. As part of our work, we had to encourage students and teachers to read more books. The first thing we decided to do to create an interest in reading, was to conduct a *Baal Mela*, in which all the activities were planned around books and reading.

We displayed a variety of books, including *Big Books*, short stories, poetry, picture books, and bilingual books. The students and teachers were left to explore these by themselves. Along with this, we conducted several activities focusing on books, such as read-alouds, action songs, storytelling, book-talk, story-writing, drawing, completing stories, role plays, Pictionary and Treasure Hunt etc. During the activities, there were many questions and queries from both teachers and students. All seemed very excited and actively participated in each activity. These activities are otherwise also regularly conducted at the MLACs.

After the *mela*, we had a discussion with the teachers in which we talked to them about the activities conducted, the idea behind each and



Figure 1. A drawing made by a student after reading a storybook.

how these activities support learning and the love for reading. We shared insights, such as how these activities are planned, how suitable books for each activity are identified; and even how to create clues for a game like Treasure Hunt.

The teachers were curious and eager to learn. They shared that they receive books for the school but have no idea how to use them effectively. Students have many textbooks and exercise books that leave them with no time to read or explore other books. Also, the teachers' main fear seemed to be that the books would not be handled properly by students and if damaged, they would be answerable to the administration. This last point was the main reason that they kept books in boxes and did not want children to use them.

This fear of the consequences of books being damaged by children had to be dealt with. But this could not be done in one go. So, we started having regular conversations with teachers regarding the advantages of reading, including how they support children's learning. We carried out more book activities with teachers and head teachers during school visits, introducing them to different categories and genres of books.

The result of these efforts is that now when I visit the school, I see teachers facilitating some of the book activities that we shared with them earlier. Their worry about children damaging books, which stopped them from allowing them to read books, has also changed. They are all enjoying children's literature; the head teacher has even started writing stories for children.

Now, students proactively lead most of the book activities. They have also taken up the responsibility for maintaining the books in good condition and have set up a 'book hospital' to repair torn and damaged books. They have a book issue register where they enter the details before taking books home. Writings and drawings that are made by them have been put up on the walls. The academic progress of the children is evident and so are their confidence levels and transformed perspectives in their writings, thoughts, and conversations. Beyond these, when students borrow books and take them home, their family members also get a chance to read books.

### Reading Mela for the community

To extend this reading culture beyond the school to the community of Silari village, we invited parents of students for a meeting, where we discussed the importance of reading; and shared the daily plans of reading activities that we conduct at the MLAC and the objectives and outcomes of these. We shared the learnings and progress of children as a result of these activities.

When we asked them about their interest in books, their responses were (i) we have an interest in reading but do not have access to books (ii) we are illiterate, that our children are getting an education, is enough (iii) we are daily wage labourers, we do not have time to read or (iv) we do not see any use of reading books.

We did not have ready answers for these. Instead, we planned a 'Reading Mela' at the *Gram*



Figure 1. The Community Reading Mela at Gram Panchayat, Silari.

*Panchayat* office of Silari village, where, along with parents, other community members, including the *Sarpanch* and *Sachiv* also gathered. We had planned several book activities in which they could all easily engage. For the read-aloud, we chose *Mizbaan*, a collection of Bundelkhandi folk stories as this is the language they speak in this region. Another fun activity was 'collaborative art' where everyone had to draw something to connect it with others' drawings. We could see them all enjoying, having discussions, asking questions, and exploring books. At the end of the *mela*, we asked everyone if they wanted to borrow books to take home to read. No one showed willingness for this.

After a few months, during the parents' meeting, we did the same activities again. This time, some of

the parents themselves asked whether they could take some books home. This was the breakthrough moment that I had waited for! Currently, in the village of Silari, there is a small community library run by volunteers. Community members borrow and read books regularly.

From worrying about the vast syllabus to complete or that students might damage books to making an effort to understand and facilitate reading activities, teachers from the Government Primary School, Silari, have come a long way. Setting up libraries is only the first step in creating a culture of reading, building the habit of reading through various other initiatives to sustain interest in reading requires time and consistent work.

#### Endnotes

- i Eklavya Foundation is a non-profit, non-government organisation based in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh that develops and field tests innovative educational programmes.
- ii Mohalla Learning Activity Centres (MLACs) are run in a few villages in the Narmadapuram district of Madhya Pradesh. Facilitated by volunteers from the villages, these are run for two hours before school starts. Along with academic subjects, other hands-on activities, fun games, etc., are also conducted.



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