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May 4, 2023 in New Delhi, India and Boston, Massachusetts, USA
Video interview conducted in English

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***JK:** Good afternoon, I'm delighted to be here. My name is John Kim. I'm a senior lecturer at Harvard Business School. I am joined by Dr. Madhav Chavan and Dr. Rukmini Banerji for the Creating Emerging Markets project. Thank you both for joining us today. I'm excited to have this opportunity to talk about both your careers, the work that you have done, and about some of the lessons that we can be imparting from your experience. Madhav, let me start with you.*

I want to talk about the period before you started Pratham back in 1994. Looking at your biography, it looks like you were headed for a successful academic career in chemistry. You studied in the US and went back to India. I'd love to hear a little bit about what it was during those early days before Pratham that kind of

foretold how you have been involved and the mission that you have been doing for almost 30 years.

MC: I came back from the United States to India in 1986. Those were the early days; the world was changing already. China had gone big time into liberalization, India was waiting for it to happen. I came to India to become an educator, to become a chemistry teacher and a researcher but at that time, the Prime Minister of India - Rajiv Gandhi – had launched the National Literacy Mission and I got drawn towards it. It was an adult literacy mission and the idea was that India was a largely illiterate country. Within 10 years, can we make India a literate country? Because without literacy development, it was not possible to make it a developed country. That was the thought. But what appealed to me was the message saying that governments can't make people literate. People have to make themselves literate and that resonated very well with me.

I thought that's what I should start working on and there is a story behind it, but I don't think we have time for that. I started working for the adult literacy movement in Mumbai. That's how I got introduced to the whole idea of literacy and education, development sector and so on, which I had no knowledge of until then. That was a government mission but as I said, the government wanted people to become active and solve the problem themselves. That's the beginning and where I learnt the skills of organizing on the ground. Of course, in my student days, I'd done my share of protests, marches and all that. That was slightly different, and this was

different. After that, the National Literacy movement almost fizzled out following 1991 when the Indian government went in for liberalization. There was an economic crisis in India, as you know, so things started changing rapidly. In 1992-93, the UNICEF people in India started talking about primary education. The Mumbai office – it was Bombay then – started talking about building a societal mission to bring business, government and voluntary sectors together, to understand problems of education, and to solve them. They picked Mumbai to create the societal mission, because it was the largest city and the financial and industrial center of India. It had all the complication and all the resources. They thought that this was the right place and if we could create a model in Mumbai, then it could happen all over India.

Already, the literacy mission had fizzled out, and I didn't know what to do but I got caught in this new web of primary education. The slogan UNICEF had given was that primary education is the best investment a country can make, because they were correlating that with GDP. This was the Asian Development Bank study that was becoming very popular at the time. That's when I started getting on the scene and saying “yes, that's a good idea, we can do it, but not the way you guys are going about it.” After a couple of years of discussion, and talking and talking, they said, “okay, let Madhav take the ball and run.” So we created this organization called Pratham and I was appointed secretary of the mission to get started. The idea was to bring again, all the resources of the city of Mumbai. The mandate of the organization was to universalize primary education in the city.

That's where we got started. I think that's enough for a beginning or do you want more?

JK: *That's terrific for the beginning. Let me ask you one more question before I turn my attention to Dr. Banerji. Sometimes when I speak to social entrepreneurs, we joke around that sometimes the social entrepreneur picks the mission and sometimes the mission picks the social entrepreneur. As you tell the story about how you got involved, it sounded like an evolutionary process.*

But going from teaching in the university setting to mobilizing lots of different organizations and people to universalize preschool – they're worlds apart. Was this just a gradual pull for you or was there a pivotal moment where you decided that this is where I need to focus my career and my energy?

MC: There was a pivotal moment. As I said, there was a story. I was a university teacher, and they were on strike. During that strike, I wrote a letter to the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, saying that you should settle the strike and we should all focus our attention on bigger problems of education, quality, and so on so forth. It seems that the Prime Minister wrote remarks on my letter and sent it to the highest government official of education. The education secretary of the government of India then invited me and said he was curious to see who this guy is. He said, "why don't you come and meet me in Delhi?" I went to meet him in

Delhi, and that's where the pivotal moment that you wanted to know about happened.

One midnight, he challenged me saying that “you talk about social justice, and all kinds of things but are you bothered that most of the people in India cannot read what you're writing about, because they are illiterate.” I was looking for answers and things to do as well. I remember that challenge at midnight vividly. I said, “okay, that's what I want to do.” Literally from the next day onwards, I started working on the adult literacy campaign. Of course, I had many arguments, disagreements and fights with the government officers, but that was different. I got drawn into it. The mission, as you said, hit me there that midnight, and I started working for literacy in India and education in India. That was a big shift from the chemistry of chemicals to chemistry of people.

***JK:** Yes, that's it – thank you. These are pivotal moments. Let me now pivot over to Dr. Banerji, because I know that you're a very early member of the team. When I looked at your background, with a Rhodes scholarship and PhD in economics, it sounds like you were on your way to an academic career as well. What drew you to this mission and the organization? Share with us a little bit about your early education, and why you ended up joining?*

RB: I had quite a boring life; I went to do a PhD in the US at the University of Chicago. I did my degree in the department of education, not economics, because I

had a much better financial aid in the education school. I don't think there was any pivotal moment for me. My PhD and fieldwork were largely quantitative using secondary data. That always bothered me, because I think at that stage in your life, you should really be able to explore questions on the ground with actual context.

While I was doing my PhD on India, I felt that Chicago was actually quite an interesting place as well. I used to volunteer in a school, not far from the University of Chicago, which at that time was quite a different place. From these volunteering experiences, I learned a lot about communities, especially disadvantaged ones and schools which were really struggling. I was their longest volunteer in a very short period of time. I think I was there for almost 3 years. I taught 7th grade in what was known in America at that time as ghettos. I began to think about what kids like this would be like in India. So my real interest in such communities came from my exposure in Chicago, which led me to say “I wonder what our own kids are like.”

There was another thing that was interesting about Chicago and the University of Chicago. I learnt a lot was outside the walls of the classroom of the university, because it was a very interesting time in the city. There was a lot of local action, local community action to improve schools. I couldn't vote in America but I could vote for my local school council. The relationship between the local community and the schools was fascinating to me, because in India, we have a very centralized system. When I, at some point after my PhD, and having worked a couple of years in Chicago, got a chance to come back, I was very keen to explore

this community-school link. What role could somebody who has been trained as a researcher play, not for academic research, but actually to make school systems better? I came back to Bombay, which I didn't know at all. Until I went to Chicago, I was in India but never really had any exposure to Bombay which frankly to me was like a foreign country. Here I chanced upon Pratham and met Madhav. Pratham was just starting – I always joke that I was never hired, so I cannot be fired.

JK: *Well, let me stay with you for the question and then I'll ask Madhav too. It's really interesting to hear that you experienced the power of community connection in Chicago, and that you wanted to come to India to really think about how to practice and affect it. What was education from your perspective? Maybe it's even a little bit more objective, because you're coming in now, looking at it from both an academic view, as well as an experiential view that you got from abroad. How would you describe education in the early 1990s, when you arrived in Bombay?*

RB: I had some exposure to the local public school system in Delhi, but Bombay was very different. Bombay had good buildings; Bombay looked like they had well run schools. Bombay had instruction in 8 languages, and I don't know how many cities in the world have that. To some extent, it looked like there was a functioning school system. But there were large parts of Bombay, then and now, which are completely unauthorized – this is where the slums are.

To me, it was very interesting to see the influence of the composition of the communities around the school. Sometimes, there were 3 schools running in the same building, drawing from the same communities, but teaching in different languages. The cultures of times of the schools were very different. So it was a very good place, I think, to learn who the children are, who the teachers are, what are they learning, and how they express their needs. Our early work was really with the preschools. We call them Balwadis. They were community-based preschool centers. Our connection to the schools also started from the community and from the family. And we began to build connections to the school. You got a very good vantage point of what families and communities were saying regarding how to mainstream into the school, and we also learned what schools felt about where these children and about their families. In many ways, I learned a lot more after my PhD than I did during my PhD.

***JK:** Let me switch over to Madhav because we're now still talking about the education challenges, as well as some opportunities that you saw in the early 90s, when you started. Picking up the story from that midnight when you decided that this is really the direction that you want to pursue, what were some of the biggest opportunities or challenges that you saw in the education sector in the early 90s? I know you started with a preschool but tell us about the thinking behind that.*

MC: I must admit that when I started to build Pratham, I had no real knowledge of what primary education was and what the problems of primary education were. I was kind of given the problem – the whole picture people usually painted was that children are going to school or they're dropping out of school before they complete their education. That is a problem to be solved. I am not an educationalist, so I saw my problem as building an organization that will solve this problem of children not going to school or dropping out. That's it. I didn't have a clue as to how that was going to be sorted out.

When I got started, we went around asking NGOs, existing NGOs and institutions what we should be doing. Everybody talked about teacher training and we said, “okay if that's what you think, we'll start doing it.” The Municipal Corporation – the government of Mumbai was a part of the Pratham coalition. They opened the doors for us and said you can start training teachers. But we got pushback from the teachers saying “what are you trying to do? You are university teachers and higher education people. What do you know about first graders in our government schools? And what do you know about kids coming from the slums, the ghettos of Mumbai, coming from these poor conditions? They are not even toilet trained when they come to our school, and you want us to give them quality education? Why don't you go out and give them preschool education?”

I think this was the pushback that encouraged me to start looking for solutions. It was clear that they did not want us into the school system, so we were pushed away. It seemed like there was a good reason why we should have started

preschool education because there was no preschool education in Mumbai whatsoever. As opposed to what we see now in 2023, the government has given a huge fillip to the idea of preschool and early education, early years and so on. Everybody talked about it, but everybody neglected it. That was the situation. and there had to be a model - how do you do that, in the crowded city that Mumbai is and was? It was worse in those days than it is now today. There was no space, there were no trained people, and there was no money available.

So you say there are only challenges, and with every challenge, there was an opportunity. That is where the interesting part came out. That's where I think my social entrepreneurship started taking shape. If you don't have money, trained people or space, how do you build preschool centers in the slums of Mumbai? That was the first challenge that we had and we sorted it out. Don't ask me how.

***JK:** Yes, and of course Pratham I guess means "first step," right? That's the literal meaning of it. Madhav, can you talk to us about how you do that? It feels like it's a very long-term goal, if you're going to educate a population as vast, large and diverse as India. You're going to start from the very beginning with 3 to 5-year olds. It's a very long-term mission. How do you start? Then I'll move over to Dr. Banerji to talk a little bit about the role that she played, but let me start with you.*

MC: If there is a short answer – today, world over there's a lot of money in education. Especially in India, a few million dollars is nothing. These donors and

foundations are everywhere to give the money for education. When we started out, there were not many NGOs working in education, and there were none working on a large scale. Working with government was frowned upon. I remember that a major industrial organization refused to fund us because we were going to work with the government. So, the situation was completely different.

The important point was to solve the problem. You don't know where you're going to end up, but you've got to make an entry. Where do you enter? Where do you start? How do you convince people, the corporate sector? It was nice to say that we want to bring business, government and voluntary sector together, a wonderful idea. But the problem was that the government did not trust the NGOs. NGOs did not trust the corporates and corporates trusted no one. So how do you get all these 3 corners together and say, "let's work together." You had to make a beginning and that beginning for us was the preschool center. There was a real need.

We could talk to different groups of people saying that this is a need and help us. We came up with a plan said, "okay, there is no money. It doesn't matter – make it a very low-cost model. There is no space, fine, ask the community people to find a space. They live there so why not find a space? We asked them to find space in prayer houses, mandirs, temples, churches, wherever, and community spaces that were there. With trained people, we said, "who cares for training?" The NGOs and the establishment frowned upon us and they said this is poor quality education.

I said no, all I want is a young lady who can play with the children and sing and dance and enjoy herself, get the children together, and give them some understanding of what early years learning is. They were all over the place. They said, do you need educated people? I said no, if you're an 8th standard dropout, that's good. Why don't you come, we'll train you a little bit and this model worked. On top of that, we added an entrepreneur angle to it. We told them that you can charge the parents whatever they can afford, and the income is all yours. I don't want to see - don't come to me if they don't give you money. But if they give you money, it's all yours. I don't want a part of it. These are entrepreneurial steps in the early days of Pratham that came in handy.

This model, which basically gave the initiative to the community, and us, the external factor, created resources which we could give to the community - that worked. Within a matter of 2-3 years, we went from nothing to 3,500 preschool centers, which is unbelievable, which was not possible. It did actually work out. As I tell people, I was riding a tiger and could not get off. That's how it has happened. Everything we've done since then; we've used this formula. When we started doing other things, we did not have money. We didn't have enough trained manpower. We didn't have space and yet every time we got it done, whether it was across Mumbai or across the country. The formula worked because you give initiative to the people, give them resources, and encourage them and let go.

JK: *Madhav, one of the definitions we like to use at Harvard Business School for an entrepreneur is a person who has relentless pursuit of a goal, regardless of the resources that he or she controls at that time. I think what you just described is a really nice example.*

MC: I didn't know that this is what an entrepreneur is, but apparently, I was.

JK: *Let me turn it over to Rukmini, because this is where I think you must have entered the picture, a couple years in. When you joined Pratham, what did you see? What was it that about this model, given your experience, your background? What did you think was distinctive and effective about this model that Madhav just described which compelled you to join?*

RB: I mean, the model was still happening. When I joined in about August of 1996, there were 150 Balwadis, preschool centers. I remember conversations about how we will manage scale and quality. In November of 1998, we had 3500 Balwadis and we had the same conversations about how to manage scale and how to manage quality. I've always been very curious about what scale is, and I've come to the conclusion that firstly, no Indian language has a word for scale. It's just bigger or more. I think scale is when it is just one step ahead of where you are, then you start calling it scale. I don't know what the Harvard Business School defines it as.

What I will say is that when I joined, there were two things going on. One was the strategy – even when we had 150, we always looked at specific units. In the context of that unit, we had to think what would it take to have every child in school? Whether it was one slum, one municipal ward, or one region of Bombay, how do you estimate and how do you get a sense of what it will take to have every child, in our case at that time, in preschool. I think it was a very interesting set of estimations and projection exercises. I can talk a lot about that. But on the other side, I think I was also quite preoccupied and getting myself educated on what it is that this context needed.

Very early on, partly maybe because I had to be kept busy doing something and partly because I had a research background, I did a small study. It was 20 schools in one part of Bombay. This was actually just for myself to understand what these kids needed. This was coming from my Chicago experience. I felt it was essential if you work with kids to really understand who they were and what they needed. And I didn't know Marathi very well at the time. I knew a little bit, but not much. If you practice with kids, they are much less judgmental than when you practice with adults. So we did a little study, me and a couple of people on 3rd and 4th graders. I chose math because it would need less Marathi from my side.

I was shocked with what we found. Perhaps this was because I was very impressed with the way the schools looked and how they ran. The assessment was a very simple one. Later on, we developed it and it became ASER. The very simple assessment showed that kids were way behind where you would think they would

be. In my mind, there were two very interesting things that were developing. It was a model that was evolving but a piece of this model was, “how do you assess or estimate at large scale what needs are and how could you move down that path?”

On the second side was how to really understand where children are at and what they need. The incredible thing was that this 20-school study was done in let's say, in a period of a month, or month and a half. Remember, I was coming out of a long duration PhD from University of Chicago. This one sheet of paper went from our office where Madhav and some other colleagues and our other co-founder, Farida was, to the municipal commissioner of Mumbai. It turned into a program to solve this problem within the space of a week. It wasn't just the scale; it was also speed. It was absolutely amazing that decisions could be taken so quickly for the whole city.

At that time, I thought to myself, “I hope I did the assessment right, because it has gone into a huge mode of and now to kids all over Bombay.” I think Madhav must have given it a name. He's a very good namer. In Marathi, it was called “Shatak Jhep” which meant jump to a hundred. So how quickly Bombay 3rd and 4th graders could jump to a hundred came out of that little exercise. I've often thought about the hard work PhD that I did. I've also forgotten what I did and it's somewhere in some archive in the US. And here was one Excel sheet. I don't even know if there was Excel at that time, but one sheet of paper that just...

MC: Lotus 1-2-3.

RB: It was one sheet of paper that Just moved to galvanize a whole city. A very simple measurement done in a way that is understandable to everyone probably hits the right kind of nerve and can go very far.

JK: *I had not heard that story before, but it really is just remarkable. Let me stay with you because it sounds like that was perhaps the beginning of the ASER, the Annual Status of Education Report. This academic report is now widely used throughout India and in other countries as well. It seems like that was where the beginning is. I want to relate that to this conundrum or this paradox - a challenge that many social entrepreneurs face.*

Do you continue to build out programs where you directly serve more and more students at scale that way? And if you do that, how do you actually maintain effectiveness? Or do you look for other ways to encourage and support others to do this and transform the sector, address the problem and the opportunity in a much larger way? You brought up this question around scale and effectiveness. Is that what was going through your mind at the time, that this was really a challenge around scaling or was this in addition to what you were already doing? Was this the beginning of thinking about what you were doing differently?

RB: I'm very tempted, since I'm talking to a Harvard Business School professor, to make it all sound very strategic and linear. I have to say that it was all more organic, chaotic, incidental, and so on, which doesn't sound as nice. But I would

say that among the things we learnt, Madhav spoke about developing some elements of a model that people can run with. Whether it was planned so that people could run with it or we could run with it is hard to say.

I think from the early measurement and assessment experiences, it was all about how you are learning by doing certain activities, which then later on can become like tools. I think that's a part I feel we, or I hope we've been able to do. If you understand a problem reasonably well, use simple tools, then more people can understand it. Part of solving a problem is understanding it and being able to articulate in a way that many more people can resonate with that. This math assessment, the little test that we talked about, was really a way of looking at something in a way that could cut through the problem, not complicate it.

We could to bring it to people, in that case it was the city government, but it could be to a school or to a community to say, "guys, kids are in 5th grade and they can't do math. Let's do something about it." Then they ask how much math do they not know. And you can see, "okay, they're struggling with number recognition. So let's go for it." I think a lot of academic work - I'm generalizing like crazy, so you should stop me – complicates things. The world is a complex place and so you need a very comprehensive [approach]. I think sometimes that gets in the way of normal people wanting to do things that can take the world forward. With the assessment done – now that I've understood it quickly – what can I do about it.

Then quickly we moved to thinking what can I do about it will be the first round, and the second round. You're not waiting for something to be completely

worked out, and then move. Around this time in Bombay, when we started, “every child in school” was a big part. We had looked at it in the sense that if every child is in preschool, then the chances of every child being in first grade are very high. Once you're in the mainstream school system, you're likely to move forward. But then along came “every child in school and learning.” Then at some point, there was a “well.” Nobody knows who put the “well” in, but it came in. What is it about every child learning – what is learning? What should we do? The math assessment was perhaps a first one. All of these things were happening together.

When you look back, you can sort of see strands but at the time, it felt like there was a problem that you've understood, and now you come up with the Balwadi or the preschool solution. You're thinking about learning and you fixed on math, maybe language or something – let's do something about it. I think that's how it has moved. At some point along this period, these MIT researchers showed up. I remember being very skeptical about this guy called Abhijit Banerjee and some girl called Esther Duflo, who looked like she was a schoolgirl herself. Why should these MIT guys be so interested in what we are doing in Bombay?

I'm not like Madhav; I'm very skeptical about everything. They came in and began to engage with us on this “every child learning” front, and we didn't do a great job, neither them nor us in the initial stages on how you assess learning and what you do. But these were all beginnings, as we realize now of longer journeys, where you're continuously thinking together – “okay, did I get it right? Did I understand it right and is this the right solution? Okay, dump this, try that and so

on and so forth.” By the way, it’s typical of Indian TV programs where people ask you some questions, and you give some other answers.

JK: *Let me shift and speak still about ASER. I will pivot to Madhav. Madhav, we were talking a little bit about the genesis of ASER. You're scaling your preschools, going from just a couple of dozen to hundreds to thousands. It seems it must have occurred to you that even at the extraordinarily fast rate that you were growing, this idea of “every child in school learning well” would take a really long time to accomplish.*

At some point, looking back it seems you shifted from providing educational services to trying to catalyze better educational delivery. Can you talk about that moment and how you thought about it? And what role, if any, did ASER play in that?

MC: If I understand what you're saying, I wasn't looking that far ahead. The “well” came later on. Mr. Rajan brought it in. But “every child in school and learning” was the mission statement at the very inception of Pratham, almost a few months into its journey. It was aspirational. We said we had to try for that. The effort and direction are towards that – that is what we have to do. But the mandate was limited to Mumbai, so we were not thinking about all of India either. But like I said earlier, we did not realize that we were actually riding a tiger and there was just no way we could get off.

People started asking us questions like, “the Mumbai problem is not solved, so why are you going to Delhi?” I kept telling them that I'm not going anywhere. The mission has just gone. People are talking about it. My chairman, Mr. Vaghul, who was the chairman of ICICI, now it's ICICI Bank, was talking to industry leaders saying this is an exciting thing and everybody should do it. Before we knew it, it was in Patna, Bangalore, Ahmedabad, Allahabad, everywhere. It's not like I planned anything. It just happened and we had to say, “okay go ahead.” All these independent units came up. This growth was something and it's a picture of what India was about to go through. People were restless. It's the speed that Rukmini talked about, the growth rate.

Earlier people did not believe that things could change in a short while. In fact, when we said that children can learn to read in 30 days, people were shocked and said it's not possible. This kid has been in school for 4 years and has not learned to read and you're saying that in 30 days the child can read. We showed them, and we actually did that. The fact that things can change rapidly was not something people believed. It was very important to show that this was possible. Indians in India and overseas were getting restless for big change. You were already noticing that in the economic liberalization – the good, bad, and ugly was happening.

India was going to rush to the next stage of development. We were a part of that. It's not like we did it. I think I must understand that this was a part of what India was going through. The young people that we were working with were also a part of that. It's not like we created a completely imaginary new value. It was

something that was happening already. So there was no pivotal moment as such but when Rukmini came up with the tool to test children's learning, we wanted to make it so simple. She wanted to make it so simple that anybody in a slum community in a village could hold it in front of a child and say, "oh this child can read words but not sentences." It was very simple. It was very important that you simplify things.

You make the understanding of the problem simpler, clearer, and faster. This is something that was happening already and we knew that it was going to take time, but we were not conscious of it. I did not think that 15 years later, I'd be still talking about the same thing. I thought that this was a no-brainer. You can see that children can learn in 30 days. My favorite example was that if one child takes 30 days to learn to read, what kind of time will it take for 100 million children? Is it 30 days, 30 billion days? The answer was simply 30 days, because if everybody starts reading today, in 30 days everybody should be reading. That is the kind of expectation I had from India. But the government of India, the policymakers and the politicians, did not respond to this challenge, unfortunately. They should have. They should have understood that there was a serious problem which is plaguing us even today.

Industrialists and business people understood it and that's why Pratham started getting more support. There are more foundations – if you see how many business people have set up their own foundations, which are dedicated to education, it all started happening in the 2000s. This is just about the time when Pratham was talking about these problems and solutions. Again, as Rukmini says,

this is like Indian TV. You asked me one question, and I give you a different answer. I don't know whether I have answered your question or not.

JK: *You have, and let me ask you one more question before I turn over to Rukmini. How would you describe the relationship you have with the government as it pertains to education? In many countries around the world, the government plays an outsized role in providing public education. It seems to me that even from the very beginning, there were the people that you wrote to, but they were also the ones who encouraged you and catalyzed your passion and your movement into this.*

You're talking about working in these schools and holding them accountable on some level, as well as holding the government schools accountable on some level. But at the same time, they have to be your partners. Share with us what the government's role is, from your perspective, in helping you meet this mission? What's the best way to partner with them?

MC: There are two things, one is that we are working with the government and the government is not working with us. It's more like we have to help them – it's the government's responsibility to do many things and we are going to help them. That's the first part that I will comment on. The second part that I learnt during this phase when Pratham growing into a much bigger, nationwide organization, is that there is no single thing called government. We make a mistake in saying that

government has not done that or government has done this. The government has many layers.

The government presents itself as a school teacher in the local school that you go to. The government presents itself as a local school official, or a district official, or a state official or a central official or even the Prime Minister. Sometimes it is, and this has happened with us, the Ministry of Education, or let's call it the Ministry of Education. It was not in favor of ASER at all, our Annual Status of Education Report, or even for Pratham for that matter. Personally, we were very nice and everybody was good and friendly but the education department never supported what we did. They never accepted our numbers that the children are not reading or not doing basic arithmetic and all that. In private they would, but in public that was not done. So privately the government or the Education Department officials accepted it, but not in documents.

In fact, there was a time when the words, the letters A-S-E-R, which stood for Annual Status of Education Report were expunged out of official records. Seriously I wish I'd taken - I didn't have mobile phones at that time but these were gone. At the same time, this is the education department, and the Ministry of Finance and the Planning Commission that India had was publishing excerpts from ASER in the annual reports. There were two faces of union government; one was the Education Department, the other was the Finance Department, Planning Commission. The Vice Chairman of the Planning Commission was talking about what we were doing to everybody. There was no single government, but the critical

government was the Education Department and they were not willing to accept what we were saying.

It was the same thing in the state government - we were dealing not so much with the union government. In India, education is a concurrent subject with the union government and the state government. We were working largely with state governments and district governments. So what we did, and as they say in soccer or otherwise, is mark players. You have to have good and working relations with schools, teachers and local officials but you also want to mark the state officials - you also want to mark the union officials.

Dealing with a government or working with a government means building partnership in different locations, at different levels. You can't say I have government partnership – many foundations and business people, rich billionaires, went about signing MOUs with Chief Ministers of various states, saying that we will do this, and we will do that. We told them this is not going to work just because the Chief Minister signed something, because we are all good at signing documents. India was signatory to many global documents, but it never worked out because they never did anything. Signing MOUs with the Chief Minister will not work.

What you had to do was do the whole thing, play – I don't know what the basketball term for it is – the whole court. This is important. In working with the government, it has a responsibility but who is this government? The government is my school teacher, my local official, my officer, my district officer state, and

everybody has to be aligned. Then it works; otherwise it doesn't work and that's why we're here today.

JK: *Madhav, you're reminding me how what you're really doing here is defining success. The definition of success isn't signing a memorandum of understanding; the definition of success is that kids are learning. Aligning all the various complex groups of people to get that done is, I think, what you're really sharing with us.*

MC: Yes.

JK: *Let me turn to Rukmini. Rukmini, you've been with the organization, obviously since early on. One way I characterize this is that it seems Pratham has gone from an innovator and a provider of education, to an organization that wants to influence how practice and policy are done in education for greater impact. As you've been part of the organization, what are your perspectives on that? Was that a very difficult switch?*

You described your background, you volunteered, and were working from the classrooms. Now all of a sudden, you have an organization that was in pursuit of greater impact and is really thinking about affecting policy and practice for others. What were some of the challenges or opportunities that you saw in that transition or transformation?

RB: Again, you make it sound like it's a very deliberate strategic move; I'm not sure it's that. I think we are big believers in practice. We are big believers in learning by doing. Now what is the quantum of learning by doing that reaches a critical mass and becomes part of your system? If I look at ASER, we realized we were getting this micro level understanding from using a tool, one community, 3 schools and so on. How can we get a lot of people to be thinking like that? Can this tool and some kind of a framework on how you move ahead, do that?

Even in the first year of ASER, we targeted all rural districts of India, and we managed to get to almost 475. There was no money. It wasn't even part of that year's plan. But I think the idea was that you need to infect other people. I'm not sure you know; when people say advocacy and influence – these are big words, but I think we just wanted more people like us. The way to have more people like us is to have similar experiences. You know, once when I got very irritated in some government meeting where people were not understanding what I was saying, one of my young colleagues said, “that's because they don't feel the problem.” They're not at the point at which you can feel that a child not being able to read is ridiculous, and this is something that we can solve.

Connecting to what you and Madhav were just saying, I think it boils down to your identity. We are very busy defining who the government is or what we do, but in India today, who are you? If you're a citizen, what is your role in the development of this country? There are many problems, but if there is a problem which I consider to be a big but simple one, it's that kids are in school but they're

not learning. As a citizen of India, what can I do about this? I have a busy life; I'm a student, I'm a professor, I'm a mother, whatever. With the ASER experience, we took our simple teaching at the right level models to more people. If you understand that there is a problem and feel it, then you're halfway to wanting a solution to solve it.

So where is the stage where you can play all this out? ASER is one kind of stage. Every year, 25,000 - 30,000 young people participate in ASER. This year, we had a very interesting experience. The ASER report was being discussed at a district level. Many district officials said, "I did ASER when I was in college, so I know about it. And I'm really keen to see what the answers are." So how do you disseminate practice? How do you disseminate tools? How do you disseminate a headache, so that you can put these things together? I would say that this summer, for example, we are right in the beginning of it. We feel that in the country, because of the new education policy and the overall national and global push towards foundational literacy and numeracy, a lot of focus is going into the early grades and into preschools. But, what about the kids who missed this cutoff of the 3rd or 4th grades?

COVID hit everyone very badly, all ages. So what about the slightly older kids? I'm not talking about high school kids who may need algebra or geometry, which we don't necessarily know how to teach. But what about kids who are going from primary school to middle school, 5th grade to 6th grade? They're at an age where a month of holding them and helping them with something can make a big

change. We decided, “why don't we take 3 of India's biggest states, the heartland of India - UP, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh, and we have 100 - 200 people in each state, maximum 400 people. How far can we go in infecting people with the desire to make the change?”

The story is still unfolding but with government, non-government, and anybody who reaches out to us, we say, “guys let's help the 5th graders get into 6th grade in a better position.” Almost everybody says, “let's do it.” They're not asking, “why 5th grade? Why 6th grade?” Nobody says all that. Again, can you hit it right, the nail on the head at the right time, and have a little bit of help. We're not able to say, “here's a big fat thing to do.” We can say, “here are a few stories, here's a little tool, come on, you can do it. I believe in you.” [Then] I think a lot of people start moving. If you do it with 165 districts in the country, well, then 600 is just a hop, skip and jump away.

We have reached out to governments, not to say “will you do it,” but to say join us. I'm really surprised by how many governments are saying, “sure, let's try it.” Who are you in today's India? As a young person in India, do you feel you can make a change? If you feel that India is going to go a long way, I think it's not only about learning to read and education, it's about who we are. The destiny of the country is in their hands. I mean, now I'm too old. There are some other people in this room who are much younger. They can do it.

JK: *Let me ask one question about the succession. You've taken over as the CEO and Madhav is, I know, still very involved. I wrote a case with him and colleagues around PraDigi, but as the CEO of Pratham now for the last several years, what's the direction? What are you thinking in terms of what Pratham needs to do? You spoke about it just a minute ago, making sure the next generation of people come through in developing leaders and scaling, but what are some of your top priorities now?*

RB: There are many problems but if I look at the things we can tackle, I feel on the early childhood and on the basics in primary, it's now a question of implementation, going wider, infecting people and so on. I think we're doing a lot of that. Many people in Pratham know how to do that, how to structure the leadership to take that boat forward. I think it's not such a hard job. Where I think Madhav has been spending quite a lot of his time, along with different people in Pratham including, is what to do after you get to a basic foundation in primary.

What is it that kids should be spending their time doing? It's not the how, I think for the younger grades. It's now just the speed, scale and getting it going. But what if you are between 11 and 16 years of age? We have 25 million kids in each age group and that's like 150 million or 175 million. How should they be spending these very formative years? If they have the basic skills, now they can do many more things. What should they be learning and how should they be learning?

Should it be individual excellence and tied to books as we've been doing? Or should it be something much more experiential that you do with groups?

I think there is a lot of rethinking or fresh thinking needed towards where all of this is going. The endpoint that we see is a 10th or 12th grade exam, and then you get slotted into another set of academic pathways, which don't lean anywhere for most kids. I think this is not just my problem and a succession problem. I think it is a thought problem that India needs to spend a lot of time on. I feel that it's probably not just India's problem, but I think it's a global problem. I've been trying to find out from global people what's next. This foundational literacy and numeracy were big ones. We have spent 15 - 20 years on that, I feel there are some solutions around the world. We just need to get it done.

Now what? I feel we are at this stage where we are experimenting. You've known from Madhav about some of the PraDigi work that they're doing and so on. But I think it's a big rethinking that is required, and it's required for the country. A lot of interesting experiments need to be done. We need to look at where they are heading. I think that if you really get into this seriously, it's got to change the nature of the education system. COVID did some of that already but I think we are coming back to some of the old ways of doing things because those are familiar. So, I would say that's kind of the next step that we need to think of, and everybody needs to think about what to do.

JK: *Thank you. Madhav, I wanted to ask what advice you have for others who may have built other nonprofit NGOs over time when it comes to succession planning? What advice would you provide to other leaders, founders, co-founders who are making that transition?*

MC: The most important thing when you do the succession, is that you have got to get out of the way of the next person. Rukmini, as you can see, is a very strong personality. When I said and the board suggested that she become the CEO after me, the understanding was that I would not be in her way. Speak only if asked, otherwise get out of the way. I think that is a very important part. The temptation to be in the organization, to lead the it and do everything is very high, but you've got to get out. It's not your thinking anymore. That's the most important thing that a person has to do when handing over the reins to the next guy. How you prepare yourself for that is important because in a large organization, there are many people.

There are inevitably loyalties and habits. I have a way of functioning and a way of decision making. Then Rukmini has a different way of doing things. The organization inevitably goes through changes, and everybody has to be prepared for it. The sooner they are prepared, the better it is. Succession planning is not just planning the next person. I think succession planning is planning the next relationships as well. People have to learn that when succession happens, it's not just one person. Everybody is succeeding. Somebody else is taking over and you

are doing something differently. That's what you have to be prepared for. I mean, we can always have more details about it.

JK: *Was it harder or easier than you had anticipated?*

MC: For me, it was easier because I've done it. I've done it many times - I've walked away several times. When I did the adult literacy program, I set up an organization and I walked away. Within Pratham, I have also given up things that I started. There were many things – for example, Pratham Books is one organization. We had started talking about publishing but when the time came, I handed it over to somebody else. That person took it over and ran with it and I have nothing to do with Pratham Books. That attitude of being able to give up something and say, “okay, it's yours now” – I've been able to cultivate that. The temptation to hold on to it is great but you have got to go to give it up. There's nothing else you can do and it's good for the organization.

JK: *Well, you seem to have struck the right balance by being involved in certain things and as you say, giving up on some other things.*

MC: Yes, I'm available, and that also creates trouble. When I start doing something new and different, it starts growing. It's not always easy – is this the

future direction, and what happens to the old? There is always organizational tension around that.

JK: *Let me ask you one final question and it's around PraDigi. It's the word you actually were focused on when I came to visit several years ago. PraDigi is essentially technology-enabled tablet learning that is, as I describe it, encouraging the curiosity and the desire to learn amongst students in rural communities around India. What role do you see PraDigi playing going forward, especially in light of what we all collectively went through due to COVID? What are your hopes and dreams for PraDigi?*

MC: I think we have learnt what the limits of technology are, or the so called edtech revolution. It went through, I would say, 3 phases. One is a pre-COVID phase. Then during COVID, everybody was going crazy about remote learning and all that. Post-COVID, everybody came back to their senses that it's not going to work. Online is not going to happen, or at least in India. There are those people who have access to devices, time, space, and all that, who can do it. But I think technology, and I've felt this for a long time, has a power and possibilities which are not tested as of yet. It is not about creating lessons on a video and giving the child the videos to learn from.

The technology opens doors that no education process has done so far. What we have seen is that when you give the technology, the devices to the children –

this opens up completely new learning processes. Using those for education is important and that is not tested as of yet. I feel that with schools, curriculum and all of that, there are many barriers. My hope for PraDigi, and this is something that we are trying to do, is create open learning. How can we create open learning today? And is this the problem that the globe is going to face? How is education going to be?

The education system, with 200 years of schools – we not coming to the end of that school model. I think it's already dead. The problems that we have today are not of reading and writing, curriculums and all that. It's the whole thing. The whole business of schooling is all wrong now for the new era. It's the technology era and technology should be allowed to transform education, and not be run as before. We already know there are so many things to be learned. The question of how kids or youth are going to learn has to be addressed and I don't think people know the answer to it. I'm doing a simple thing, in the areas where we work. I'm saying, “okay, according to my power and capacity, PraDigi will help children learn and we will create an assessment mechanism and certify.”

This should be an open learning process. Anybody should be able to join. Anybody should be able to learn, and we're saying “okay, I certify you.” It could be as simple as “can you read? Can you do simple math?” And I do the certification. This is open learning and it doesn't have barriers. I'm not sure I'm doing a good job of explaining it, but I think today's education system is full of barriers. The whole idea is barriers. Can you go above 10th grade? Can you go about 12th grade? Can

you go above college? Can you go to a university? What if none of this was to be done? So there are examples.

Now, I am going to say to start training people, young people in the communities to do something, let's say with computers. We already know and this is happening big time in computer systems. I can see the young men who are manning the cameras here. I bet you they have not gone through any formal training of photography. It's completely outside the system. The system is there and for the top layer of the society. For the bottom 70% across the world, the system does not make a difference, and people learn on the job. There is the possibility of educating all those 70% of people. It exists and that's where PraDigi is going to go. It has already gone. Technology will be helpful for them to learn, because we can't build institutions.

As with my first experience of Balwadi preschools, we didn't have space, money, or trained people. It's again the same thing. We don't have money. We don't have space, and we can't build things. We don't have money to build things and yet the university has to be there. How do you bring that knowledge to this bottom 70% and say "learn physics, and learn about black holes." You don't have to go to a major university to learn. You can learn it yourself. How do you do that? That is the challenge.

JK: *Well, I think that's a good place for us to stop for today.*

MC: Yes. Thank you, John.

JK: *You managed to start with the preschools and you brought it full circle.*

Thank you so much for making some time today.

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