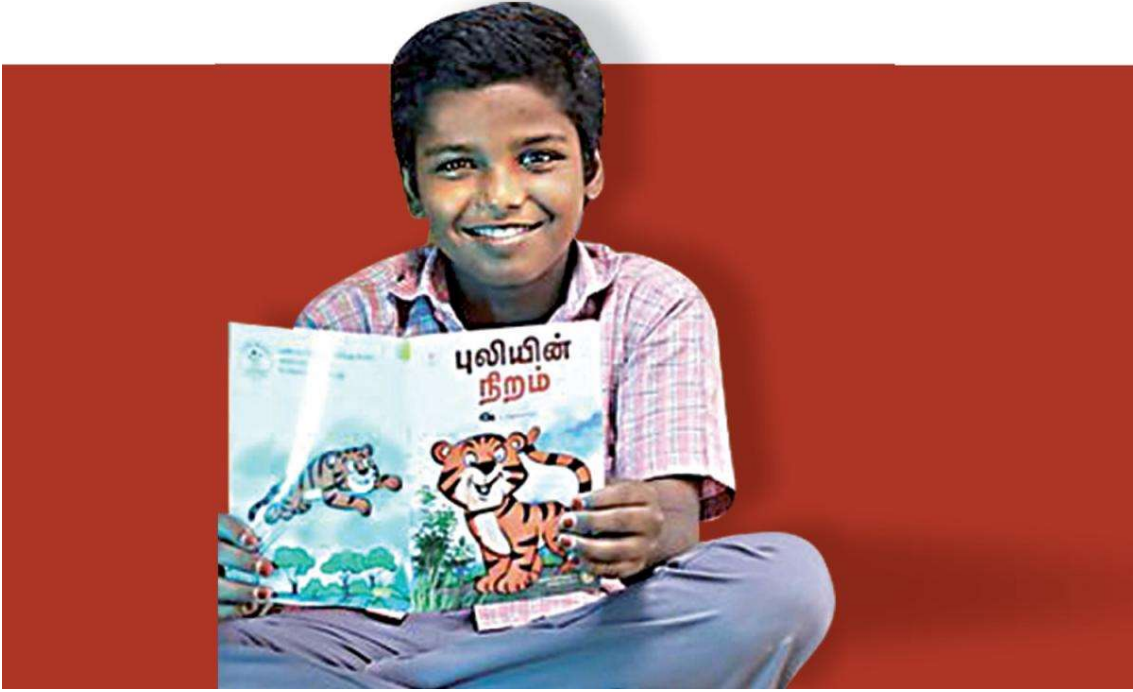


Reading movement: A travel towards dazzling destinations



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The Independent Reading Movement (Vasippu Iyakkam) was launched to train the underprivileged children in the government schools so that they read anything on their own. The movement's basic purpose is to hand over to the children small books written in simple language with illustrations. There is no room for the old heavy load. This arrangement has been in place to motivate the children to read books of their own choice. The objective of the movement is to ensure that the children's preference for books expands to textbooks.

Yet new initiatives are inevitably enveloped by old shadows. Understanding is the first requirement. A fumbling caused by lack of understanding obstructs a journey and sometimes, halts the travel half-way.

What is the dangerous old shadow? It is the perspective that regarded children as 'empty vessels.' Adults can pour into them whatever they like. In fact, every child

needs an apt opportunity. But it is difficult for the adults to provide it. It is easier to dish out advices. But the reading movement is no forum for them.

There is another old shadow. That is the shadow from the creative writers. After all, this is reading of literature. Totally new. The reading movement is a like a book; it is not a place where creative writers come and upload their thinking and language. Here only the children count. That they read counts. You and your load are not important.

Reading language

In the early 1990s the Literacy Movement (Arivoli Iyakkam) invented several things one of which was a reading language. The Virudhunagar district unit of Arivoli Iyakkam published a magazine 'Vaasal' for the sake of learners. Once a news item captioned as 'Namma Naadu' (our country) was published, which the learners found it difficult to read. The volunteers said that it would have been easier to read if the headline had been 'Nam Naadu.'

Similarly, the word 'vaarungal' (Come) caused a difficulty in reading and so they read it as 'vaanga'

This is a reading language that goes beyond the frontiers of spoken and written languages. It consists of short and simple sentences, funny content, well-known simple words, repetition of certain basic words in stories and lots of pictures. All these are certainly attractive to children.

Creation of a simple understanding through these simple techniques is the fulcrum of the reading movement.

53 books

In the first phase of the reading movement, the Tamil Nadu government printed 53 small books and sent them to some schools for pilot study. This was the first step, very important at that.

Several have authored the books. The names of creative writers such as Udhayasankar, Salai Selvam, A.Vennila, Muruges, K.M.K.Ilango, Kalaiarasi and so on catch our attention. V.Vasanthi Devi, who was Vice-Chancellor two times, who has held chief posts for various government Commissions and who is now 83 years old, is one of the creative writers ('Kuzhandaiyin Sirippu' – Child's Laughter) of the reading movement. At the other end of the spectrum is class 9 student Ramani ('Pookalin Nagaram' – Town of Flowers).

The books have been divided into four chapters titled 'Nuzhai' (enter), 'Nada' (walk), 'Odu' (run) and 'Para' (fly). These are not steadfast rules; just flexible categorizations. That's all. Anybody can take up any book and read. It all depends on the child's reading skill and also on the teacher or volunteer who accompanies the child. If there is full satisfaction, the travel will stop.

How should the next-phase books be like? The language should be more simplified. The content involving bird, animal, plant, tree, river, mountain and sky should gain

traction... These are the thoughts that dominated the dialogue on the next phase of the reading movement.

Field scenarios

As much important as the plan itself is the field. The plan will shine only on the success of the field. Classrooms and children are the field here. When the children cry in enthusiastic and euphoric voices, "I have read; I have read on my own," the voices are the symbolic cries of the field's success.

Educationist Gijubhai Badheka has written in the book 'Divaspana' (Daydream) translated into Tamil as 'Pagal Kanavu', "the school children pounced on the story books like hungry tigers." The imagery of the scene is absolutely true. Nowadays children are seen in all classes pouncing on the books of the reading movement like hungry tigers. It is a scene like the one of the long-separated people coming back in reunion.

The moment the children take up books, they begin reading without any prompter asking them to read. When some children shout at the top of voice, "I have read four books," and "I have read seven books," the classroom seems to be blossoming radiantly. On the other side, the differently abled children not able to speak fluently keep the books close to chest, reading the words slowly though stammering. After done with reading, they smile, radiating brightness of flowers. Our eyes get drenched.

On the one hand, there is a feeling of pride and on the other, a feeling of tenderness. That's the field of the reading movement.

Doors opened

The purpose of the journey is to unlock the doors. And to let the new light sneak in through the opened doors.

The reading movement has unearthed and tied together several talents that have till now lain beyond the realm of vision and recognition.

There are volunteers encouraging and enthusing the reading children; there are teachers who come forward to tell stories on their own after the reading session is over; and there are students also. These are the stars discovered by the reading movement.

The reading movement says, "As everyone speaks, there is history; there's a story." Yet another door opened by the reading movement is the rising demand for a centre for girl's education and reading. Those, who had learnt just a little through the literacy movement in the past and those, who had dropped out of schools, particularly the girls, must also be encouraged to read books, so go the voices

now. Following the reading movement, the demand is now gaining strength for a center for girl's education and reading.

Martin Luther King's speech in 1963, which begins with "I have a dream," is the most unforgettable. Yes. We have a dream: To give the underprivileged children books for reading and also to give their working parents books.

Translated by V. Mariappan