



Parrho Punjab Volunteers in a Training

## **Volunteer Recruiting in the State of Punjab, India**

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For the majority of the western world, the word education brings to mind images of tome-like math textbooks that are accompanied by calculators and protractors. Large gyms where one school's team can compete against rivals are adjacent to computer labs and libraries. Memories of success and failure in academics, athletics and the arts are universal in the minds of westerners. In these societies, parents form the backbone of volunteers who help out in school if and when they are needed. Step outside of Europe and North America and these images and memories of education and the role of the volunteer within this dynamic change drastically.

This is not to say that non-western educational systems do not have their successes and positive aspects. Every country has its own well-funded private schools and quality government-ran educational establishments. But the sad truth remains that when compared to their western equivalents, the standards and quality of education in these societies are sorely lagging behind. This is especially true in the more rural and underdeveloped areas of this world. In these areas, committed volunteer work can be the difference between success and failure for the average rural school-child. To analyze and comment on educational volunteer work for the entire non-western world is well beyond the scope of this report. Instead I shall focus on India, more specifically, the state of Punjab located in northwest of India. I intend to answer the question of why volunteers are so crucial to educational success. How are these volunteers found and trained? What can be expected of these volunteers and what abilities do they possess? What impact does their work have on their families and the communities that they operate in? And perhaps most importantly, the simple question of why do they volunteer? Of course, these volunteers need to be mobilized to begin working before any of these questions can be answered. I shall begin by describing the motivations and methods utilized by the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) known as Pratham that operates throughout India with the deceptively simple goal of getting all children in school, and learning well.

### **Pratham and Parrho Punjab: An Overview**

Pratham was founded in Mumbai in the mid nineties with the goal of getting underprivileged children into schools and learning at acceptable levels. Following their success in Mumbai the NGO began to expand its work throughout India. At present Pratham operates across the length and breadth of India where its legions of full time employees and volunteers work tirelessly to spread education to the most rural of villages. The Punjabi branch of Pratham began work in 2006. Since then they have worked in over 13,000 schools reaching 1.3 million students.

Pratham Punjab began in 2006 with two programs, the L2R program (Learn to Read) and the "50 libraries" initiative. They focused on improving the learning levels throughout Punjab of the "3 R's",

reading, writing and arithmetic. The job would not be easy. At the time the most recent ASER survey (Annual Survey of Education Report) concluded that 50% of students in standard III classes could not read a standard I text. These alarming wasted years of education prompted the Pratham Punjab team to create accelerated programs that could bring those students who lagged behind upto expected levels. This involved performing a baseline test on the students within a particular school and then splitting them into five groups based on their level of comprehension (or lack of). For instance, in mathematics, the five groups consisted of: no knowledge at all (unable even to recognize numbers), number recognition, knowledge of addition, knowledge of subtraction and knowledge of multiplication and division together. Each group then received training specific to their levels of understanding.

2007 brought a watershed moment for education in India with the creation of the nationwide “Read India” program. In Punjab, this program took the region specific name of Parrho Punjab (Read Punjab). Despite the high intentions of the program there still remained a major roadblock to the implementation of it state wide, a lack of teachers. This is where volunteer mobilization becomes critical to the success of Read India. Mobilization of volunteers is part of a two pronged strategy by Pratham Punjab to increase education standards and spread its learning methods. The first prong of the strategy involves community activism (of which volunteer mobilization is a crucial aspect). Increasing efforts within the community of a particular school to hold teachers accountable for the learning of their children while at the same time providing volunteers to aid in the educational process undoubtedly improves the efficiency of learning. This process though is limited by the resources of the community and involves hard work on the ground by the Pratham teams to mobilize community support. This is where the second prong of the strategy comes into play, government support. While the government can be slow to act its reach is vital and necessary to bring about widespread improvements in education. As the paymasters for each school the government can exert further pressure on teachers to improve learning. By coordinating both the community and the government to pursue higher standards of education a mechanism is created to bring about widespread positive change within schools.

Now that we understand the processes utilized by Pratham Punjab to bring about improvements in education the discussion can begin regarding one of the most important aspects of Pratham’s work, volunteer mobilization. Why does Pratham see volunteer work as vital to the quest of improving education? As mentioned above, community mobilization relies, in a large part, on creating an army of volunteers who are committed to educating the children in their community. Volunteers represent a direct link to the communities in which they operate. This in turn gives the community itself a role in the education of their children. From a practical perspective, volunteers also bring much needed aid to overworked teachers. One government teacher who taught in a village outside of the city of Amritsar informed me that she is one of only two teachers for over 250 students. Volunteers for over crowded and understaffed schools such as this are vital to ensure that children receive sufficient attention and are not lost in the shuffle. My translator and guide, Pearl, (who is a regional coordinator for Pratham) informed me that overcrowded schools such as the one mentioned above were the norm for much of her district. Also, due to the success of the Pratham teaching methods (especially in teaching English) many parents were sending their children back to school, increasing the burden on overworked teaching staffs.

From this it is clear to see that every single volunteer not only eases the burden on the teachers, but also are invaluable to the education of the children. The success of Pratham Punjab is in itself a double-edged sword. Bringing more children into school makes the lack of teachers even more pronounced. The undoubted progress gained through increased school attendance puts even more pressure on the government teachers to educate the growing numbers of children. When viewed from this perspective, the need for increasing the number of volunteers within primary schools throughout Punjab becomes even more urgent.

### **How are volunteers found? What can be expected from their work?**

the course of my time in Punjab I spent a day accompanying a Pratham team in order to view the

process of volunteer mobilization. This process cannot be achieved simply through door-to-door solicitation. The village as a whole must be involved or the higher goal of community responsibility in education cannot be attained. The first step necessitates a meeting with the village head, known as a Sarpanch. The purpose of the meeting has two goals, first to gain his approval and that of the community to begin canvassing for volunteers. Secondly, the Sarpanch can be helpful in pointing the Pratham team in the direction of suitable volunteers from within his village, but this is not always the case. Previous to our meeting with the village head I had been told by a group of PBC's (Pratham Block Coordinators) that the Sarpanch's recommendations were not always valuable. In past meetings these PBC's had found that the Sarpanch may put forward friends or family who are neither qualified nor motivated to be volunteers. During the meeting I attended, after the Sarpanch had agreed to Pratham working in the village he included his daughter amongst his recommendations for volunteers. In many ways the meeting with the Sarpanch seems to be a formality to gain community support, rather than an effective method for locating suitable volunteers.

The group of PBC's to whom I spoke informed me that by far the best way to recruit volunteers was to go directly to the schools and ask teachers for their recommendations. Most of the volunteers that I interviewed told me that they had been asked to work either by the teacher at the school (who had been visited by a PBC) or by a PBC who had been referred to them by the local schoolteacher. One volunteer, Jagdeep, had already been volunteering at her local school before the Pratham team even came to her village. She has always maintained a passion for teaching and along with volunteering has been actively pursuing her Bachelors degree in order to become a fully qualified teacher. The previous summer she had participated in the Pratham summer camp program. Needless to say, she jumped at the opportunity to receive Parrho Punjab training.

The level of training appears to be varied between all of the volunteers that I spoke with. Some volunteers such as Priya and Rajwinder who both worked at a school in a village outside of Jalandhar had received almost two weeks of training. They had both been volunteering for over a year and had participated in the Pratham summer camps the previous summer. They got a week of training for their work in the summer camps and then another week of training for their Parrho Punjab responsibilities. Another volunteer, Trishna, who operated within a village outside of Ludhiana attended four days of training spread out over the course of a month. The location of the training was in a village over ten kilometers away. She told me that the only way she could attend the training was due to the government teachers at her school paying for her transportation costs. By contrast, Parminder, a volunteer of five months at a different village near Ludhiana told me she has received no official training whatsoever. The teachers at the school where she worked had taught her the Parrho Punjab methods. Proximity to the training center matters when it comes to finding volunteers, as does travel costs. Perhaps when training does occur a small stipend can be provided for the travel costs of the volunteers. An organized carpool so that the volunteers all reach the training safely could also help. This would also help alleviate the worries of many mothers who fear for their daughter's safety when they have to travel outside of the village for their training.

Once the volunteers are operating in a school they bring a number of positive changes to the classroom. One PBC mentioned to me that the age of the volunteers matters a lot. Many older, qualified teachers already have mental structures in place about how to teach and are averse to changing their routines. Due to the fact that the volunteers are all young and lacking a University degree they are far more receptive to the Parrho Punjab methods. Along with this, the volunteers act like older siblings to the children. They are far more willing to join the children in playing the Parrho Punjab learning games. One government teacher gave me a very interesting interpretation on the effect of the volunteer work. She believes that the combination of the teacher's experience allied to the volunteer's enthusiasm and interaction with the children had become extremely effective in encouraging the students to learn. This synthesis also had the added effect of making the children eager to come to school everyday, thus lowering absenteeism.

As mentioned above, the volunteers also add a much-needed extra set of hands. They are able to take the reins of a class in the event that a teacher cannot make it to school or has to deal with

another matter. Multiple sources have also informed me that since the beginning of the Parrho Punjab program the etiquette and manners of the children have improved. An example of the improved behavior of the children, pointed out one volunteer, is that children now ask if they can be excused to use the rest room. Volunteers can be considered a major reason behind this shift towards better behavior. The children have become personally invested in their own learning and no longer misbehave due to disinterest or frustration.

From a realistic perspective all that can be expected from the volunteers is that they show up everyday and teach the children to the best of their abilities (and training). In practice, the volunteers perform above and beyond their duties as unpaid workers. The extra hours put in by most of the volunteers I spoke to proved invaluable to everyone involved with the school. Along with this, the children definitely form a positive familial relationship with the volunteer's that goes beyond the classic teacher-student relationship. This in part is due to compassionate methods prescribed by Parrho Punjab. These include the instruction given by the PBC's that the volunteers never scold the children. In general, all of the volunteers I have met felt genuine compassion and love towards the children that they work with and these feelings are reciprocated by the children. Volunteers should be encouraged by Pratham to continue their work. Also, aid could be given in the form of resources and advice to the volunteers so that they can pursue the goal that many of them hold to become fully qualified teachers. A desire to teach is only one of many reasons that I heard during the course of my interviews. Why these young women devote so much of their time to volunteer work proved to be one of the most important and intriguing lines of questioning during the course of my questioning.

#### **Why do they volunteer? What are the rewards?**

There can be no debate that good volunteers combined with the effective Parrho Punjab methods lead to a marked improvement in the learning levels of the students. This can be proven through testing surveys. What remains much harder to pin down are the motivations and driving factors that bring these volunteers back to school every day. The group of PBC'S I interviewed informed me of the methods they used to inspire volunteers. When faced with a prospective volunteer they tell them first of all that the Parrho Punjab work represents an excellent way to continue their own education. Helping in school also builds the self-confidence of the young women. Volunteer work also imparts a feeling that their work is improving the prospects of their village, thus bettering their community. And above all, it helps them establish their own identity in the society, that too as a teacher, the profession carrying a lot of nobility and respect. The PBC's told me that it was not always easy to convince people to work for free, sometimes taking multiple visits over many days. Given this, I feel that now is an apt moment to discuss the only physical reward that the volunteers receive, the Pratham experience certificate.

I received mixed responses from the volunteers when they were questioned about the value of the experience certificate. Rupinder, a volunteer at a school in Batala, told me that she was not working for the certificate at all. To her, the schoolwork was strictly a way to fill time before she married. In contrast, Varinder, a volunteer from the same area saw great value in the certificate. She believed that it would definitely help her get a job once she completed her bachelor's degree. Sunita, a volunteer from Jalandhar, shares Varinders opinion. She told me that the certificate would certainly help her get a better job teaching in schools once she completes her course work, especially with regards to private schools. Some volunteers remain unsure about its value. A common response was that the volunteers have been told that the certificate will help them find a job, but they had no way of knowing if this is true. On the whole, I found that the certificate does represent valuable physical proof that a volunteer has experience working in schools. Whether or not this translates into better job opportunities in the future for volunteer workers remains unclear.

What did become clear is that the experience certificate represents only a minor reason for why the volunteers valued their time working in schools. A love for teaching and for the children kept the volunteers working month-to-month. I began to notice a pattern as I spoke with more volunteers. The teaching methods of Parrho Punjab made the students enthusiastic. They enjoy the

educational games and story telling during their two hours of Parrho Punjab class every day. Harpreet, a volunteer in a village outside Ludhiana told me that her students even show up to school early and are very eager to learn. She mentioned that the children even ask her when the classes are going to begin! This enthusiasm for the methods of Parrho Punjab from the students combined with the obvious advances achieved in the level of knowledge inspires the volunteers. Individual success stories of students can be found in many of the schools as both children and volunteers grow in confidence and experience. One particular case aptly represents this transformation. At one school I visited near Jalandhar I met and interviewed a very shy volunteer named Rajwinder. She would only whisper answers to my queries to my guide Pearl, (but in the classroom she was completely different I am told). She told us about a particular student named Luvdeep. While he was in the second standard he was one of the quietest student who always sat near the back of the class. After a year under the Parrho Punjab teaching methods he had become very vocal and one of the brightest students in his entire year. Rajwinder and Luvdeep perfectly display the value of volunteer work in school. Through Parrho Punjab they both have been brought out of their shells to become active members in the classroom and community respectively.

The volunteers as a whole get a great feeling of pride from the work that they do to help the children of their community. One PBC told me that many of the volunteers she works with are very proud of being known in their areas as the "Pratham people". A love or interest in teaching seems to be the initial reason for why many volunteers agree to work for no wages. The enthusiasm of the children and relationships that are formed with them by the volunteers keep them volunteering long after they had planned to. This also builds their confidence and gains them respect in the community in which they live. These appear to be the main reasons behind why volunteers begin working and then continue coming back. I could not get an accurate number for how long the volunteers usually continue working, but none who I interviewed mentioned ending their work in the near future. Many had been working for over a year! It appears that the students love the volunteers and vice versa, and this seems to be the main reason behind why these workers continue to work for free. A desire to continue to affect the positive change of their work on the students and community at large also plays a major role in the motivation of the volunteers.

### **What is the volunteer's effect on the community? The family?**

A volunteer's work has a ripple affect throughout the community. The obvious improvement in the academic ability of the student improves the confidence of the volunteer while at the same time bettering the surrounding community. A government official from Jalandhar who I spoke to informed me parents are now sending their students to the government schools instead of the private ones. Parrho Punjab and their unique methods are credited for this shift. Specifically, the English learning program has convinced many parents of the value of government schooling. Knowledge of English is considered to be a very valuable skill by many families and Parrho Punjab has built a solid reputation through their training methods. This displays in practice how one of the goals of Pratham Punjab is being met. Communities in many areas have begun to mobilize and push for better education for their children. Sending their children to a school where they will receive a quality education (instead of just assuming that since private schools are more expensive they are inherently better) shows how the focus on education is increasing.

When questioned about the quality of education now as opposed to when they were in school all the volunteers believed that there had been a significant improvement. Priya mentioned that during her primary school years the teachers ascribed to what she called, "Teaching with a stick". The disciplinary methods were very strict; this has been altered under Parrho Punjab. Jagdeep tells me that the new methods actually allow the children to understand the underlying concepts behind what they are learning instead of just repeating what they had memorized. Rajwinder believes that mandatory attendance has helped the teacher monitor the students so that their progress can be better gauged.

The effects of the volunteers work on their families have been harder to ascertain. It can be assumed that the families at least want their daughters to have some work experience, although

this can vary. In some cases the parents of a volunteer actually pushed her out the door and into the volunteer work. The reason being that they were accomplishing nothing by just sitting at home all day. Other parents take a more pragmatic view. They are pleased that their child is doing some work, but would prefer it if their child were being paid for their time. Then, of course, there are the parents whom I mentioned earlier, that would not even let the Pratham team into their home to talk with the young woman about volunteering. Hopefully as the value of Parrho Punjab becomes more apparent these somewhat conservative families will relent.

### **Conclusion**

All that I have seen and heard about Parrho Punjab and Pratham has greatly impressed me. The volunteers are an incredible inspiration for my more jaded western sensibilities. To them, the work itself provides its own rewards. The positive results that I have seen amongst the children bodes well for the future of education in India, as these children will hopefully grow up and demand even better schools and material for their own kids. One of the most interesting things that I observed during my tour was how simple changes in the materials used to assist the teachers and volunteers can make a massive difference. It seems so obvious in hindsight that a more interactive classroom where the children are involved in their own learning is superior to the classic lecture and note taking style of teaching. I cannot remember a time when I was in primary school that I genuinely wanted to learn math. Yet I saw with my own eyes the sheer enjoyment that children received while playing bundle-stick and currency note. They hardly realize that they are setting the foundation for their own potential success in future.

Despite all these positives, at whatever school I visited the issue of money always somehow came into the conversation. Be it for the school itself or the volunteer. Money is the sole reason behind why many volunteers end their work in a particular school. As mentioned above, some teachers actually pay the volunteers out of their own pocket in order to keep them working. Unfortunately, money, or lack thereof, seems to be a worldwide problem for most government ran school systems. This problem just becomes more acute in places such as India. Ultimately the only way that the lack of funds can be alleviated is through nation wide economic growth and upward social mobility. The Parrho Punjab methods being implemented at school throughout Punjab will help move the society along this positive path. Not only are volunteers improving their station, but also for the kids, the future is slowly becoming brighter by the day.