
Innovative Strategies to Promote Literacy Skills in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: *Empowering students with literacy skills so that they can grow and compete in the global workforce can be achieved via a strong and robust educational system. However, in some third world countries including Pakistan, ready access to schools may not be a viable option for some students due to resource constraints or due to cultural or religious limitations. Innovative strategies to enhance literacy skills can have a significant impact in alleviating gaps between those students who are denied educational opportunities vis-à-vis privileged students who receive quality education, and several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have taken creative steps to provide opportunities for children in remote parts of Pakistan to develop literacy skills and promote a reading culture. This paper will explore the results from a qualitative study on three NGOs and explain how they promote literacy for the most vulnerable populations.*

KEYWORDS: Pakistan, literacy, mobile libraries, NGOs, innovative, educational strategies

INTRODUCTION

The Centre for the Developing Child at Harvard University (Harvard University, n.d.) discussed the significance of serve and return interactions for early brain development. When an infant cries or babbles and the caregiver responds to their cries or cues, they strengthen and expand neural connections and develop trust and secure attachments. Unfortunately, in many developing countries including Pakistan, robust interactions between parents within the lower socio-economic tiers and their children are limited during the early years because both parents work to meet the demands of their growing families, and the newborn is often looked after by an older sibling or relative. Many children in in Pakistan also do may not have the opportunity to attend school, which further limits their chances of future success (Abdullah et al.,2014). According to UNICEF, Pakistan has the second most out-of-school children (UNICEF, n.d.) and many children do not become functionally literate. UNESCO defines literacy as “a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing and using numbers throughout life and is part of a larger set of skills, which include digital skills, media literacy, education for sustainable development and

global citizenship as well as job-specific skills” (UNESCO, 2023). There are multiple constraints which impact the educational sector and especially government run (i.e., public sector) schools including a lack of qualified teachers, resources, available transport facilities (Hillman and Jenkner, 2004), and negative perceptions regarding western education (Jamal, 2016). Many parents believe that it is not worth sending their children to schools because they will become too westernized, this is especially true for parents of daughters.

This qualitative study explored steps three NGOs in Pakistan have taken to ensure that children in remote villages are provided opportunities to develop literacy skills. The methodology, results, and implications are described.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A successful economy requires a robust and strong educational system. If a country invests in education for their citizens, it reaps significant economic and social dividends. In 2021, public spending on education comprised approximately 2.38% of the total budget of Pakistan. In comparison, the 36 industrialized countries spend approximately 4.52% of their total budget on education. Given the lower priority education receives, many children in Pakistan continue to be deprived of achieving even basic literacy skills.

There are several benefits of an educated society including a) a stronger economy b) financial stability c) political stability d) healthy choices and f) career advancement. We will explore each of these in more detail.

Stronger Economy

Literacy is a key factor of social change and allows people to better compete in the global economy. With increasing diversity and globalization, there is worldwide competition and opportunity for skilled workers. A literate person can find better paying jobs than someone who is not able to read or write, which can have significant economic benefits and lead to a better standard of living. A well-educated person is also likely to have better communication skills and understand technical language more easily, which increases their chances of career advancement. In this way, literacy can serve as a hedge against poverty. A Gallop study commissioned by the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy (2020) highlighted that providing opportunities for all adults in the United States to achieve at least a Level 3 literacy proficiency would produce “an additional \$2.2 trillion in annual income” (Rothwell, 2020, 4).

Financial Stability

Literacy can also help people to achieve financial independence. A literate person is better positioned to manage their budget, pay bills, and save for the future including retirement savings. The World Bank's 2017 Global Findex database ranks Pakistan as "the lowest in terms of financial access rate with 100 million unbanked adults" (Fatima, 2019). The head of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants Pakistan highlighted that low financial literacy among small and medium-sized enterprises and young entrepreneurs in Pakistan "is a significant factor in the equally low levels of successful access to external finance and the absence of long-term financial planning" (Accounting and Business Magazine, 2021). Low literacy can also make the population more vulnerable to investment scams and fraud (Arif, 2015) especially if they are unable to read contracts or rely on a family member or friend, who may cheat or guide them to imprudent financial decisions.

Political Stability

A literate voter can balance perspectives across different sources, including pamphlets, newspapers (Swaby and Waldman, 2022), and social media, to make informed decisions. However, those who cannot read, often rely on others to understand political matters, which can create bias and propagate extreme ideologies.

Healthy Choices

Limited literacy can also affect the health of the population because people who are unable to understand or read the literature or dosage requirements on a medicine label may not use the medications as required. A 2009 study demonstrated that people with lower health literacy are more likely to misunderstand the dosage or prescription instructions (Davis et al., 2008). Similarly, a person with limited linguistic skills, may not understand the severity of a health condition and delay medical intervention until it is too late (Mahmoud, 2022). Others may prefer to visit unqualified quacks (Ali et al., 2020), who provide fake or ineffective treatment.

Career Advancement

A literate person is often considered a more desirable candidate for many positions and therefore has a better chance of career advancement than someone who is unable to read or write. Literacy better positions someone to continue their educational trajectory through professional development classes, which yields additional benefits for society in terms of economic output, productivity, and creativity. According to the National Literacy Trust (as cited by Parmar, 2022), those who are literate, earn on average 16% more than their counterparts with low literacy skills (Parmer, 2022)

METHODOLOGY

The primary purpose of this study was to explore innovative strategies involving mobile libraries utilized by NGOs in Pakistan to create opportunities for young children to develop basic literacy skills and develop a love for reading. Three NGOs were identified for the study via snowball sampling. A consent form was sent to a senior executive from each NGO to determine if they would like to participate in the study. The consent form explained the purpose of the study, the proposed procedure, and potential risks. Participants were told that they could exit the study anytime they wanted to without any consequences. They were also allowed to refuse to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable responding to and remain eligible to participate in the remainder of the study. All three NGOs agreed participate in the study by returning a signed copy of the form.

Remote interviews of the executives were virtually conducted via Zoom and lasted for 30-45 minutes. These were recorded for accuracy purposes and transcripts were sent to the participants for member checking. Member checking can enhance the credibility of the data as participants get an opportunity to view their responses to ensure accuracy. Eleven semi-structured interview questions were developed to understand how each NGO promotes literacy and the challenges they face in promoting literacy in Pakistan.

Description of NGOs and Senior Executives Interviewed

Alif Laila Book Bus Society.

Alif Laila Book Bus Society utilizes different ways to transport books to children. These include mini vans, rickshaws, and camels. Basarat Kazim serves as the president of Alif Laila Book Bus Society and was interviewed for this study.

Digi Kutub Khana and Kitab Gari

Two affiliated initiatives, *Digi Kutub Khana* (digital library) and *Kitab Gari* (book vehicle) also utilize mobile libraries to reach underserved populations in Pakistan. They are an initiative sponsored by the Children's Literacy Festival and *Idara e Taleem o Aagahi* (center for education and awareness). Baela Jameel, the founder and CEO of *Idara e Taleem o Aagahi* was interviewed for this study.

Kitab Dost

Kitab Dost (friends of the book) is based in Peshawar, Pakistan and conducts reading sessions to develop the love of reading for Pakistan's marginalized children in a relatively underserved

province. Ms. Gulrukh Mehboob, who is a senior executive of the organization was interviewed for this study.

RESULTS

Analysis of the data was conducted by reviewing the transcripts and highlighting relevant content. Three broad themes included i) how each organization was formed; ii), the challenges that each NGO faces; and iii) the successes each NGO has achieved in promoting literacy.

History of the NGO

Alif Laila Book Bus Society

Alif Laila Book Bus Society was started as a stand-alone library within a stationary double decker bus in Lahore, Pakistan by Dr. Baker, an American who was living in Pakistan at that time. Once Dr. Baker and her husband moved back to the US, the responsibility of running the library fell to Pakistanis who lived in Lahore and were interested in promoting literacy. Ms. Basarat Kazim, who serves as the current President of the organization got involved at this time. She shared that she conducted “advocacy drives” wherein, “I started going around to government schools and asking the children, you know telling them what the library was and showing them the library card and thinking you know if you become a member, you can take books home and then you can read as much as you want.” The children were very excited when they learned about the library and that they could read and borrow books. However, personal finances were a constraint because of the required membership fee. Ms. Kazim continued, “I used to cry every time I came back from the government schools, I used to sit and cry because they were in a pathetic state... If our children if the children in Pakistan were to be or to even see even glimpse a better world, then they would have to be reading.” This is consistent with the teachings of the Greek Philosopher, Plato, who believed that young children are malleable and therefore urged parents and teachers to read stories that encouraged strong citizenship (Plato, 2023).

Ms. Kazim was committed to promote literacy in this population and described a grant that allowed the organization to create a mobile library, which would be completely free. “In the early 90s, we were given a grant, and we got a bus, and we call the *Dastan Go*, storyteller in English, and this was the first mobile library. It started going around to schools. And when children would see these books they would say, really are there other books besides school textbooks? Some children didn't even have that idea that besides your course textbooks, there are other types of books also.” The organization now operates multiple mobile libraries, operating out of a variety of vehicles including mini vans and rickshaws, which can access rough and unpaved roads.

With Covid and social distancing, many schools and public libraries were closed. Inspired by Ruurs's book, *My Librarian is a Camel* (Ruurs, 2005) and with the collaboration and assistance of Raheema Jalal, the principal of a Girls High School in Pakistan, and Zubaida Jalal, the Pakistani minister for defence production (Female Education Trust), the organization initiated the camel project, which would serve as a cheap and ecofriendly alternate to transport books to villages. The camels are outfitted with custom-made book pouches and travel to the least populated region in southwestern Pakistan to promote literacy. Each camel has a name "because it's essential for the children to connect with the camel. The camel is going to be doing them a favor. It is going to be bringing books for them, and they must love and respect the Camel". The first camel that they commissioned to transport books was named Roshan which means light.

Digi Kutub Khana and Kitab Gari

Ms. Jamil shared two separate initiatives by her organization to develop literacy in underserved populations in Pakistan. The first is "incredible libraries" in a trunk, or the *Digi Kutub Khana*, which comprises of a trunk full of 100-150 books catering for different age groups and supplementary educational materials "such as maps, board games such as chess, scrabble and ludo, as well as a tablet so there is technology, even at this very simple level." This allows the NGO to leverage low-cost digital and mobile devices to develop the love for learning.

The second initiative, *Kitab Gari*, consists of mobile libraries very similar to the vehicle libraries operated by Alif Laila Book Bus Society. In the famous children's novel *Matilda*, Roald Dahl beautifully states, "So Matilda's strong young mind continued to grow, nurtured by the voices of all those authors who had sent their books out into the world like ships on the sea: These books gave Matilda a hopeful and comforting message: You are not alone." Ms. Jamil expressed similar sentiments when describing her organization "the idea of mobile libraries has been there for a long time everywhere all over the world, but we thought, rather than have you know, like those ice cream vans running libraries and so on let's really make it into a wonder *chasm e vah hoti hay jaise* when children look at it in, oh, my goodness, and it's so colourful and so happy here, so the children feel that his is so special for them; the kitab gari has come to them it's like a magical happening in these very deprived communities." The *Kitab Gari* is "currently designed for an urban focus and particularly for urban slums and deprived areas... in Pakistan, we have 40% of population in urban areas, of which 40-50% live in urban slums and we have constant migrant communities coming in search of livelihoods and hope; the government is weakest in its education provision in urban areas, and particularly urban slums, which are often not recognized/regularized for a long time. We thought that if we do outreach through a Kitab Gari it can serve two purposes, one is that it should be attractive to children and parents illustrative of the wonder of learning and secondly it should be almost like a mini learning festival or a mini learning school without any boundaries; it goes to a community and by the way they have the learning /assessment tools as well."

When asked how the organization selects the areas they will serve, Ms. Jamil explained that they rely upon the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), which conducts surveys in rural and urban areas and “gives us a very good sense of what the rankings of districts are is and also when we are selecting a district, we have intra district inequalities, so we find out where in in a district, in tahsil or sub district or a Union district where the weakest literacy challenges are or the highest are.” She elaborated, “ASER tools are the ones which help us to understand what are the baselines of the children that we are trying, or even adolescents who are out of school, who we are going to target for literacy and language and what kind of design we should have so if somebody is with zero literacy and no words at that level what do we do if somebody has added a word level, but not a sentence level, then we, what do we do with somebody that sentence level, but not a story level what do we do similarly numeracy. So we group the children and the target groups and then craft and customize our learning package according to that and that's what makes it so exciting and that's what the why the outcomes are always so positive”. Once the organization makes the decision to establish a new mobile library, she goes to the community and inquires if “two or three young people will be willing to spend four hours a week to open the theater the *Digi Kutab Khana*” so that children of different ages can read the books. This takes a lot of trust and commitment to let children take books, read, and then return them back.

Kitab Dost

A clear goal and coordinated efforts are important for the NGO to flourish (Bigelow, n.d.). A hallmark of *Kitab Dost* is their sustained and coordinate efforts to promote literacy, while adapting to changing circumstances and needs. Ms. Mehboob shared how the organization started after Ms. Bushra Rahim, the president of the NGO received some books as a donation, and they wondered what they should do with them. Ms. Mehboob suggested “why don't we create sort of a mini library of these books” wherein volunteers would visit the children in their schools and villages to “conduct reading sessions for these children, based on the story books.” *Kitab Dost* recognized that children in Pakistan are often not provided opportunities to read books for fun and wants to expose children to books that are from different genres “to improve reading habits amongst children, the love of books amongst children.”

Kitab Dost has “different initiatives to promote literacy” including *Ujala* schools (*Ujala* means light in Urdu), which were sponsored by the NGO before they expanded to mobile libraries. The volunteers would visit schools in Peshawar, which is the sixth largest city in Pakistan (Sawe, 2019) in the relatively undeveloped Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The organization recognized that many schools did not have a library and offered to help develop these to provide a better opportunity for children to continue developing literacy skills. After the Covid pandemic halted their efforts and they determined, “we should have a vehicle library for them which will be mobile so call it rickshaw library, or whatever, but a vehicle that could visit those places” They approached

Alif Laila Book Bus Society, who agreed to provide them a vehicle “as a pilot phase and we started our mobile sessions with that library.”

Challenges

Availability of resources and reliable employees who perform effectively and with dedication, honesty, and motivation can be significant constraints for any organization. Each member of the NGO interviewed shared challenges that they have faced, as they sought to grow their outreach. For example, Ms. Kazim shared that Alif Laila Book Bus Society was constrained because many people in Pakistan do not understand the value of developing literacy skills. Since the NGO does not operate traditional schools where they “move them [children] from one grade to the other, so there is less control over how to ensure that children read at a specific level or repeat their classes.” This mindset creates prevents the organization from promoting “literacy to reach our people [Pakistani children] through other means than school and it is much more challenging actually because people don't really believe in that.”

Teachers who subscribe to only traditional educational methods can also become an obstacle for the NGO, “we are always up against the wall people don't understand. The teachers, I mean so many times when we were going to schools and say that you know let the children draw, let them relax and teachers would say why do you come to waste their time and ours also?”

Ms. Jamil at *Digi Kutub Khana* and *Kitab Gari* shared, “One of the biggest challenges we face is money. I am forever raising resources and funds; I would like to see some systematic support so that whether it's industry or government or private sector. I mean the more resources we have, the more we can multiply because we have a presence in many districts of the of the country and engage in long term partnerships”

Ms. Mehboob from *Kitab Dost* shared three specific challenges, which echo the themes from the previous NGOs: lack of resources, poor institutional support, and lack of trust from the community and the school establishments. There is a significant limitation in the resources available to them, even though people in Pakistan contribute a lot to charitable causes “in Pakistan, a lot of charity is given no doubt, I mean you have like I think we have a world record and giving like blood donation, or something and, but the thing is that I have seen within our society people will give charities to hospitals or they will give charity like giving food and all that all of these are really good initiatives but we as a society we don't have this attitude of giving charities are giving money to the those initiatives which are focusing on education.”

A second challenge, which is somewhat related to limited resources and was also discussed by Ms. Jamil, is poor institutional support. “We don't get any financial support from any other organizations and on societies.” Our society has great potential to donate. They do give a lot of

charities it's just that we have to promote this culture that your charity should also go to school, your charity should also go through education.”

The third challenge described by Ms. Mehboob is “getting the confidence of the communities as well as the schools.” Similar to what Ms. Kazim described, “they [educators] are sceptical. They would be like what do you want to teach children if it's not a textbook, what do you want to teach them what kind of teaching is that because if something is not related to curriculum, and that is not considered education, here we need to change that attitude again, that is another constraint that we face it's hard to convince the heads or the faculty of the school. We are happy that they eventually do welcome us, and they do, but we need to like change that attitude so and, obviously, the mobile vehicle when we go to those communities, we have to like really, really take their confidence first and tell them what we're doing so these are the three different challenges.”

Successes

Challenges related to support and resources are inevitable, but many NGOs, including the three which are included in this study have also had notable successes in changing the educational trajectory of individuals and the communities they serve. Ms. Kazim shared an example of Sumaira Siddiqui, who was forced to drop out of school because her parents did not believe in the value of girls receiving education. However, the Alif Laila Book Bus society visited Ms. Siddiqui's parents and convinced them to continue sending their daughter to school. The parents agreed, and today Ms. Siddiqui has a master's degree and helps the very organization that provided her an opportunity to receive education. Ms. Kazim claimed that although the children of a village in Baluchistan, initially communicated only in the provincial language (Balochi) but after the camel started to visit, they switched to Urdu when speaking to outsiders. This transition reflects their eagerness to engage with the resources and opportunities provided by the Mashal Camel Library

Ms. Jamil shared how *Digi Kutub Khana* and *Kitab Gari* create awareness of educating girls and described *Siyani Sahelian* (Wise Friends), a second chance program for girls aged nine to nineteen years, who have dropped out of school. They also use the resources within their library network to educate their users on social issues such as gender discrimination, personal and public hygiene, addressing climate change, and the greater opportunities available with better literacy skills. For example, they encourage children to visit different events to gain literacy skills and introduced them to the Pakistan Learning Festival, which promotes literacy skills and greater learning opportunities. Children who attended the festival learned about approaches to address challenges related to climate change and received saplings to plant trees. Many created a lush garden in front of their hut to protect from strong winds of the ocean and the sand. Inspired by their dedication and motivation, a local author featured them in a story highlighting how they had implemented ideas for mitigating climate change within their communities. Ms. Jamil also explained that they also encourage other organizations to develop libraries for children. For example, the *Digi Kutub*

Khanna in the city of Aliabad has become a model for a library movement in another region, Hunza and they now have a beautiful community library there, which was inspired by *Digi Kutub Khana*.

Ms. Mehboob recalled that when they started the *Kitab Dost* program, many of their patrons, could not even “write one whole sentence in any language, whether it's English or Urdu”. However, after conducting a few sessions, their literacy skills improved drastically. She stated that “most importantly, we have seen that the children have developed. not only a habit of book reading, but also love for books” and gave examples of children who even though not financially stable, used to collect money to buy story books. These children would then come and show the book that they had purchased with their pocket money. In addition to developing the love for reading, *Kitab Dost* also attempts to develop awareness of issues such as “climate change and about cleanliness and all those issues, especially peace and tolerance, because that's really something we want right now, and we have seen that children do understand these concepts”.

Developing Trust with Families and Communities.

Ms. Kazim shared that the parents do not typically object to children going to read from the mobile libraries, “I think, with literacy they don't have an issue because we you know with our program, it basically costs them almost nothing you know, because when our facilitators are going into their communities with the rickshaw, the book bike etc., they are not being charged anything so that's not really an issue.”

Ms. Jamil shared “parents are hesitant when the school is far, when there are no proper teachers. And there is no protection for the children. In all our programs children's safe-guarding and protection is a very big piece, nobody goes out without that. Also, the kitab gari is actually going to the doorsteps, so girls are so excited, and parents are so excited that they come and that kitab gari, there is an opportunity, so we haven't seen any resistance to kitab gari is learning at your doorstep.”

Ms. Mehboob stated that “Peshawar is a small city with a lot of people right it's kind of historical and everybody in Peshawar will sort of know another person, you know, especially in the villages”. The first thing that they do before conducting sessions is to speak with “mean a person who is respected within that community. We reach out to the elders of the community; we tell them what our initiative is we try to make them understand” our goals. Once we get their blessings, they help “us identify children who do not go to school”. She further added, that “wherever our mobile library vehicle goes, and when we conduct sessions, one of the Elder from that community is always present we make sure that parents or elders are present.”

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The World Bank defines an NGO as an organization that aims to “relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development.” NGOs have become a powerful tool for change in the social landscape, especially in underdeveloped countries (Castells, 2008). They assist in creating greater educational opportunities for the population, which can lead to better health outcomes and a more prosperous society. Education for both boys and girls is essential for the economic development and social welfare of the country (Tembon and Fort, 2008). In Pakistan there are limited opportunities for boys to continue with their education especially in the remote and rural areas of Pakistan. However, this is a more serious and pressing challenge for girls because the cultural, ethical, and social beliefs of Pakistani society do not emphasize education for both sexes. In many cases, girls get married at a very early age and drop out of school to take care of their marital responsibilities including looking after the house, in-laws, and children. The example of Sumaira Siddiqui from the Alif Laila Book Bus Society is a good example. With limited financial resources, girls are often the first ones who are withdrawn from school. With lack of access to nearby schools and unable to afford transportation fees, parents of daughters feel unsafe to send their girls to school. As a result, they do not achieve even basic literacy skills. The innovative strategies to promote literacy adopted by the three NGO’s provide better opportunities for girls to read and develop literacy skills.

As developing nations attempt to achieve economic prosperity, it is extremely important to provide citizens with knowledge and skills to make sound financial decisions. A financially literate population can assist in stabilizing the economy, thereby contributing to reducing the cycle of poverty (Simpson, 2021). Nasir and Nazli (2000) conducted a study utilizing data from the Pakistan Integrated Household Survey (PIHS) to determine the returns to education via the Mincer earning function (which explains wage income as a function of schooling and experience). Their results demonstrated that an extra year of schooling can increase income by 7.3%. However, attaining literacy skills can take time, energy, and resources. As the results of this study highlighted, resources can be a significant constraint and while the three NGOs are attempting to foster a culture of reading, their impact can be more forceful if governmental organizations also collaborate with them by providing needed resources.

Political instability, insurgency, and social, cultural, and religious traditions all create roadblocks for Pakistan’s educational landscape. With scarce government educational resources for the marginalized and vulnerable population, assistance from non-government organization can be of great value. Good and sustainable interventions require understanding of the issue, and creative ways to resolve challenges via actionable plans. The three NGOs are very familiar with the need they aim to address i.e., poor literacy skills and are using used unique and sustainable ways to encourage children to read. While this does not solve the literacy gap in Pakistan, it is a step in the

right direction. With greater awareness at local and global level regarding the inadequacy the current educational system, we can only hope that they will inspire more people to serve as ambassadors for helping children in Pakistan to receive the basic right of education.

Pakistan has relatively few *effective* governmental schools. Many public schools have poor resources such as blackboards, toilets, chairs, or educational materials and ghost schools, where the teacher draws a regular salary, but they do not go to teach are mushrooming (Reza, 2018, 2021). Students are taught from textbooks that are outdated which do not prepare them to meet the demands of the 21st century. The poor quality of the education makes children lose motivation and with a requirement to help their parents, many drop out from school. Mobile libraries reach these vulnerable and hard to reach populations and provide children an opportunity to develop their literacy skills. In many of these libraries, children are provided reading material (in English and Urdu) and given an opportunity to work with technology, learn self-grooming skills, and develop other skillsets.

While mobile libraries have been a blessing for children of Pakistan, the concept of a library on wheels is not limited to third world countries. Tell a Story (Portugal), BiebBus (Netherlands), Bibliomotocarro (Italy), the Floating Library (United States), Words on Wheels (United States) are a few examples of mobile libraries in developed countries. Policy makers in all countries can continue utilizing innovative strategies to promote the love of learning. For example, in Puerto Rico, a large selection of books neatly stacked in blue and red plastic bins on a public thoroughfare, allow people to borrow books to read. In Norway (Bergen) decommissioned public phone booths have been converted into micro libraries and reading kiosks.

Limitations

The primary limitation to results from this study is the limited number of NGOs (three) interviewed. However, the interviews, websites, and photos that were shared with the researcher represent a robust array of information regarding the successes and challenges faced by each NGO as they continue to promote literacy to the most marginalized population of Pakistan.

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