

"OBLF's team has now spent a week in the field, distributing dry ration kits to those living at the margins.

This team has been on the field almost every day, working with those living in these rural communities to identify those suffering the most and delivering ration kits to them.

Enclosed within are a collection of ten field stories from our week in the field; these represent our direct experiences, and also is indicative of the massive challenge still ahead of us."



A CRY FOR HELP, IN TIMES OF CORONA: KIRAN'S STORY

An on-the-ground report from One Billion Literates Foundation



"I haven't seen my construction supervisor in two weeks", he said, his eyes clouding over with tears. He was responding to my question about whether the supervisor responsible for the construction project was taking care of people who were working for him. "I am already five thousand rupees in debt, and I get food from wherever I can", he continued tears streaming down now.

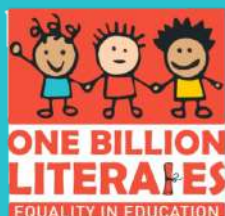
Kiran is a 28 year-old construction worker from Bihar living in a small shanty with fifteen others; abandoned by his employers, Kiran has no one to complain to; no one to seek redressal from; he had come here to Bangalore three years ago, lured by the prospect of a booming construction industry trying to serve this city already bursting at its seams. Today, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, he - and his cohort of fifteen co-workers - are amongst the millions of daily wage earners who have been left completely adrift; and completely bereft of any income;

To heap insult to injury, the only 'social distancing' Kiran and his fifteen house-mates can practice in their two-hundred square feet shanty is to have a filthy bandanna tied across their faces; the resigned looks in their eyes tell a thousand stories - not the least of which is one of desperation for food; and the abject fear that makes grown men cry.

OBLF - a non-profit which has been working for the last decade, at the intersection of education of rural under-privileged children, and skilling & empowerment of rural women - decided that the communities that we work with would be best served at this juncture by us volunteering our time, our resources and our money to buy people like Kiran the most basic essentials; and the dignity of knowing that they will not be reduced to begging.

Our decade long association with this Anekal sub-division of Bangalore which has 227 villages, and the fact that our women para-teachers belong to many of these same villages ensures that we are able to identify and specifically target pockets of migrant and non-migrant populations who are the most deserving of help; This small army of OBLF's women para-teachers has come together to procure and prepare individual food kits with food rations for one month for a family of four; which then get distributed based on the acuteness of need; the local police-station has also been very helpful in guiding us to the right locations.

The need is immense; the pain insufferable; And, this is where you come; this is what you can help us build on and sustain for some more time; for as low as Rs 2000 per month (\$30/month), you can help support a family of four for one month. Come, join us in helping make the lives of abandoned families like this slightly more bearable; give them something to look forward to.



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A CRY FOR HELP, IN TIMES OF CORONA: AN ABANDONED FAMILY OF EIGHT

An on-the-ground report from One Billion Literates Foundation



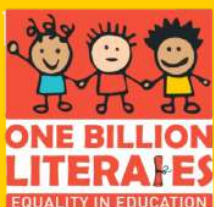
It was going to be our last stop for the day; there is nothing extraordinary about the path we are driving on; a typical village mud road, but more desolate than usual; I have to suddenly veer sharply to the left onto an even more narrow path and now we have sharp twigs scratching the car on both sides; we are being guided to this spot by one of our para-teachers who lives a short distance away. In a few minutes we come upon a clearing, and it turns out to be a very poignant scene. There is a family lolling about, outside their small tenement; I count 7 members; 5 children barely a year apart, their mother pregnant with the sixth; their father, abandoned by the owner of a small poultry farm he was employed to look after, is staring at us expectantly; he has been told some people may come; as we talk to him, we realise there is an eighth member – a handicapped younger brother of this man, too shy to come out of the house. He tells us about trying to make sure that whatever food they have is shared between all of them, and the two scrawny stray dogs which have adopted the family. His face hidden behind the bandanna, his eyes reveal the misery.

Tales like this are not uncommon in the 3 hours the OBLF team spent scouring the inner by-lanes of Anekal sub-division of Bangalore this afternoon; at each such spot we leave behind a food kit with rations enough for a month; it is no gourmet meal, but it will be enough to sustain them.

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A CRY FOR HELP, IN TIMES OF CORONA: THE ONE WE HAD TO TURN OUR BACKS ON

An on-the-ground report from One Billion Literates Foundation

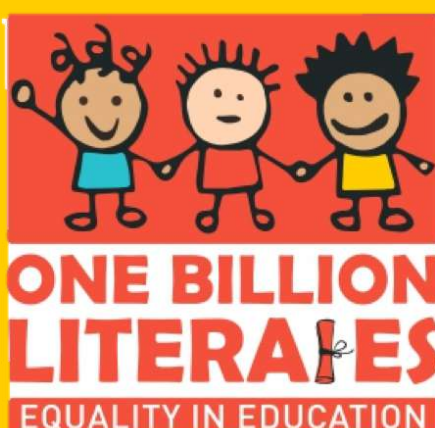


“Sir, you have given your food kit to everyone else, but I haven’t got anything”, she said; she seemed very young with cheap imitation jewellery on her, but she had a young baby glued to her hip. “I am sorry”, I said. “We will be back day after tomorrow with more food ration kits”. My words of explanation seemed hollow and empty even to myself. I knew my OBLF team and I would definitely be back – but her faith in any official or civic body was long broken. She pleaded again – in the vain hope that we could magically produce one more kit. But we were far too deep in the hinterlands to be able to do anything today. That sight of her following my car as I slowly drove away, is something that I will replay in my mind’s eye for a long time to come.

Today was another day in the field. Not all of the stories ended with heartbreak. True to our strategy, we went deep where no government or civic body reaches. We were guided by our para-teachers who have an intimate understanding of the lay of the land; and we also had the help of an awesome police constable deputed by the Police Chief of the local police station who showed us small shanties into which huddled a couple of dozen men, women and small children; too scared to come out until we showed them the food kits and the masks we had brought with us; and then we had a mini stampede on our hands as we started handing out the masks with everyone eager to get their hands on one with hardly the patience to listen to instructions on how to don the mask correctly and handle it hygienically.

Over the five hours on the field today, we distributed close to thirty food kits – each food kit holding rations for a month for a family of four, and close to five hundred masks; If you try to do the math, it will not add up. In these places, the average family unit is usually higher; quite a bit higher. Tomorrow will be focused on more procurements and packing into kits; And we will be back the day after, looking for that young lady and her baby on whom we had to sadly turn our backs today. To help One Billion Literates Foundation continue our mission to help populations on the margins stave off hunger and starvation, please donate!

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A CRY FOR HELP, IN TIMES OF CORONA: "UNCLE, I WANT A MASK"

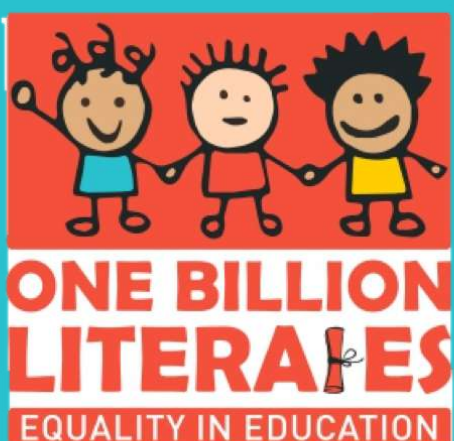
An on-the-ground report from One Billion Literates Foundation



"Uncle, I want a mask", a tiny hand tugged at my trousers. I looked down to see two very young children, both boys, reaching out to ask for a mask. In the crowd of a couple of dozen people who had surrounded our car clamouring for masks, these two young boys could very easily have been injured. It did not matter to one of the children that he was naked except for a rag of a t-shirt – he was adamant he wanted a mask; the mask now placed properly on his face and covering most of it, his eyes gleamed his happiness.

Today was another day in the field. Abandoned construction sites, street performers cleaning their musical instruments, head-load workers staring desolately into emptiness, women thrusting their crying infants forward in the hope of currying sympathy – all these and more greeted us as we went deep into the hinterlands; the overnight rains did not make our task easy – but then again we were in the relative luxury of our cars; the people we were seeking to help were busy cleaning out their partially flooded shacks and drying out their soaked clothes. It was a reminder once again of the human tragedy that is unfolding; one that is every bit as tragic and painful as the impact of the Virus; Over the five hours on the field today, we distributed close to thirty food kits – each food kit holding rations for a month for a family of four, and close to five hundred masks; If you try to do the math, it will not add up. In these places, the average family unit is usually higher; quite a bit higher. Tomorrow will be focused on more procurements and packing into kits; And we will be back the day after, looking for that young lady and her baby on whom we had to sadly turn our backs today. To help One Billion Literates Foundation continue our mission to help populations on the margins stave off hunger and starvation, please donate!

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A CRY FOR HELP, IN TIMES OF CORONA: LISTENING TO COMPLAINTS

An on-the-ground report from One Billion Literates Foundation

"We are being forced to pay rents by our landlords", he said on the verge of tears; "how do we pay when we don't have money to get food?", he continued.

OBLF's team is deep inside one of Bangalore's largest industrial belts in the outskirts of the city. The landscape is dotted with communities and colonies of migrant and non-migrant populations, and has the trademark shanties with the blue tarpaulin which serves as the only shelter against the elements; and if they are lucky, they have a tiny 3'*3" shed, open to the sky, where they can bathe in some privacy. We are the first "officials" who have reached this area in vehicles bearing some food. There is no point in explaining to them that we are not from the government.

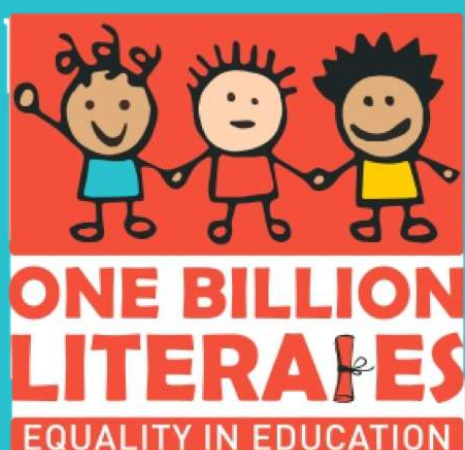
So for the next half-hour we are listening to complaints; some are complaining about landlords who are extorting; others about husbands being out of jobs for several months; yet others about back wages due from construction contractors who have vanished. And all this, while trying to manage the scores of people who have emerged from the shanties clamouring for food.

It is deeply unsettling to listen to these complaints; it is even more unsettling to know that you have absolutely no wherewithal to do anything about this. At least not today; not right now. But yet, this is the reality of tens of thousands of our citizens; the situation exacerbated by the current lockdown. We distribute our food kits and we leave; but with a heavy heart knowing that this situation is not going to change easily.

To help One Billion Literates Foundation continue our mission to help populations on the margins stave off hunger and starvation, please donate to our cause!



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A CRY FOR HELP, IN TIMES OF CORONA: ESTABLISHING A SUPPLY-CHAIN

An on-the-ground report from One Billion Literates Foundation



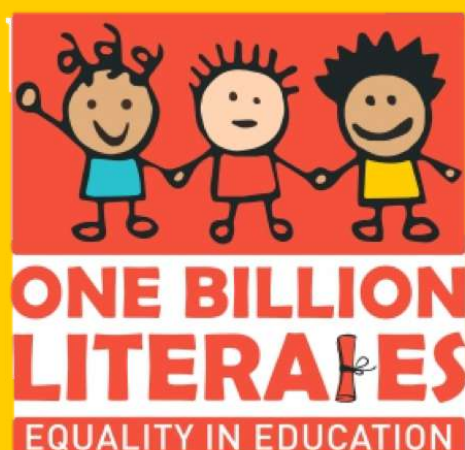
OBLF's team has been on the field for nearly a week now. There is a lot that we have learnt so far. One of our most important lessons comes today – in the form of the importance of establishing a reliable supply-chain; and even when you have thought that the supply-chain has been established, it will break and you have to scramble again.

We are on the field when I get a call from our transporter who had committed to picking up stocks from the wholesaler that he is not going to be able to come through; he has some vague explanations, but is appropriately contrite. But that doesn't do us any good; We need a transporter fast – because the wholesaler is unhappy and breathing down my neck; he can't hold on to that quantity for too long; it's taking up too much space. So in the midst of our field distribution activity my project manager and I are on our phones, calling various people and working through their myriad systems and processes; finally, a mix of pleading, begging, and exasperation works; we get a firm commitment to have our stocks picked up.

Being on the field is not just about distribution. It is also about many, many other tiny details – some of which we have no idea about and are learning as we go. Working with a wholesaler to create kits for us helps us get economies of scale; we are able to stretch your donations further and get more; But now we have this process established. The wholesaler is happy. We are heaving a sigh of relief.

Tomorrow is another day. We have 75 kits and many thousands of lives to touch. To help One Billion Literates Foundation continue our mission to help populations on the margins stave off hunger and starvation, please donate!

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A CRY FOR HELP, IN TIMES OF CORONA: DELIVERING WITH SURGICAL ACCURACY

An on-the-ground report from One Billion Literates Foundation



My car's odometer reads 104.6 kilometres; we have been on the road for 6.5 hours; Well-paved village roads, pot-holed state highways, breached bridges – we have seen it all today; and we have done some serious off-roading as well; it has been a really long, tiring day; but it has been a good, satisfying day. And all thanks to OBLF's wonderful, dedicated para-teachers.

With their tremendous connections and good-will in the tiny, remote villages that they have great familiarity with – they have specifically identified families that are struggling to survive in the aftermath of the lockdown. Some of these have very aged members, no longer able to traverse long distances to get their essentials; some others have physically challenged members – one with several members with some physical challenge or the other; yet others with single mothers bringing up multiple small children. The OBLF team is doing what it does best – serve the rural under-privileged; most importantly, serve the most under-privileged of them all; we are able to do this only – and only – because of the reach we have through our para-teachers deep inside the heartland of rural Bangalore. This reach is unparalleled.

And despite the fact that it has been long, tiring day – the team is upbeat; because it knows it has made a difference; and that the most deserving of these incredibly poor households will not go hungry. To help One Billion Literates Foundation continue our mission to help populations on the margins stave off hunger and starvation, please make a donation!

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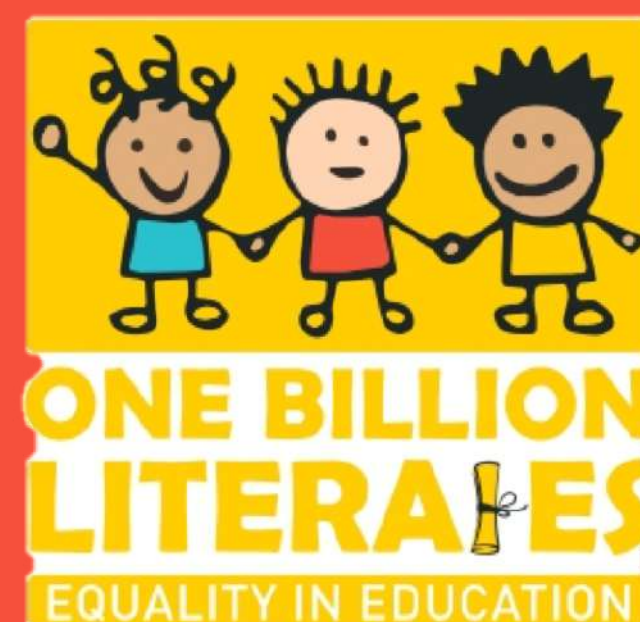
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A CRY FOR HELP, IN TIMES OF CORONA: THE VILLAGE ON TOP OF A HILL

An on-the-ground report from One Billion Literates Foundation

It has been a long day. We have been on the road for more than 5 hours already. This is going to be our last stop, but we are nowhere near our destination. The route is quite magical and the scenery very striking. We are passing through verdant fields, two vehicles hugging the middle of a narrow, but well-paved rural road. At one point, we have to cross a small bridge which has been built over a stream; the stream is overflowing from the rains this week and the bridge has been breached. We drive through watchfully, a small prayer on our lips; if we have a vehicle breakdown here with the heavy load, we would be here for a very long time; but we keep going, for we know that we will be the only hope for Thimmaia Doddi, a tiny village on the top of a small but steep hill. This has all of twenty houses on the two sides of a lane with more than two hundred people living there; It has a small, quaint government run school which we have been working with for a few years now; and that is how we have come to know about their hardships.

The village is a happy place, with very happy people; the poverty is striking, but gets eclipsed by the cleanliness of the one cemented lane it has and the pretty picture it poses with tiny, neat houses on either side. We are done pretty quickly with our work there, and a few mandatory photographs taken - we are soon headed back down; across the same overflowing stream and through the fields.

This has been a good day. A long one, but a good one. There's much more to do; if the lockdown continues, we will need to come back here in another couple of weeks; but till then the people of Thimmaia Doddi will not go hungry. To help One Billion Literates Foundation continue our mission to help populations on the margins stave off hunger and starvation, please donate!

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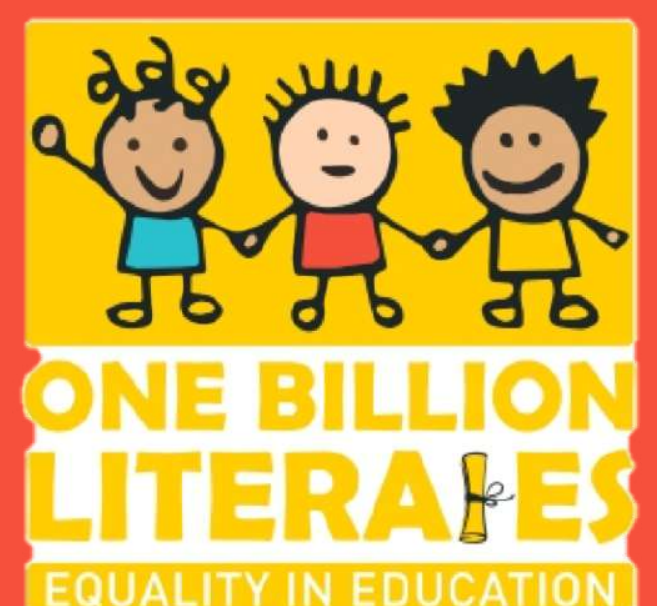
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A CRY FOR HELP, IN TIMES OF CORONA: THE SEAMY UNDERSIDE OF BANGALORE'S CONSTRUCTION BOOM

An on-the-ground report from One Billion Literates Foundation



We were actually not supposed to be on the field today. The team needed a break after nearly an entire week in the field traversing the terrain and scouring by lane after by lane. But a message last evening said a group of more than 180 construction workers had been abandoned by their builder and were out of food; and there was no way we could ignore a message like that.

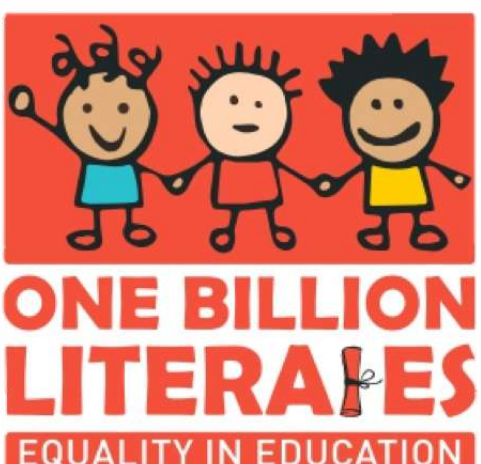
So, we loaded up again this morning; two cars - both sagging under the weight of more than a couple of hundred kilos of food rations each; and witnessed first-hand the seamy underside of Bangalore's construction boom. Where we are is a posh set of residential apartments - one block of which has been finished. The others are in various stages of completion. Of the more than 1000 workers employed by the contractor, only about 200 remain. The rest have left - or fled. And probably comprised the tens of thousands who were trudging or finding some means of transport back to their villages. Now neither the contractor nor the builder has turned up for almost two weeks. No pay. No food.

This builder is one of the bigger ones. His family's massive mansion is a landmark in one of the suburbs, with its high walls and his name proudly displayed in engraved copper outside. But his workers live in horrific conditions in the construction site, in tin sheds that are packed together in filthy conditions. There is a massive area of land which has been excavated for foundation, but now is overgrown with weeds and there is stagnant water from the rains this week; on the precipice of the excavation, are the tin sheds. I make my way gingerly to get a sense of this place and choke at the unseemliness of their living conditions. If the virus doesn't get them, there is enough here to kill or maim otherwise.

But, their relief knows no bounds. They line up in an orderly manner. And take their share. And the masks. We distribute 500kg of rations here. Barely enough for ten days. We will need to come back here if the lockdown extends.

There still is a lot to be done. The need continues to be immense. The pain immeasurable. To help One Billion Literates Foundation continue our mission to help populations on the margins stave off hunger and starvation, please donate.

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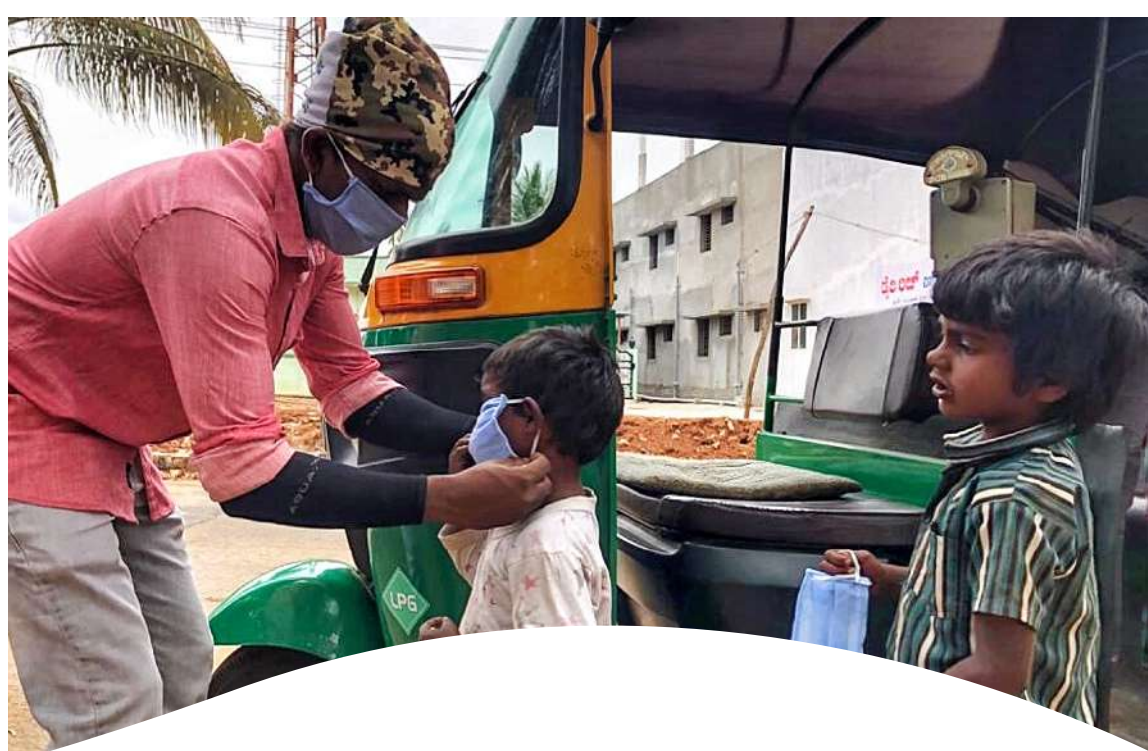
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A CRY FOR HELP, IN TIMES OF CORONA: THE TEAM BEHIND THE SCENES

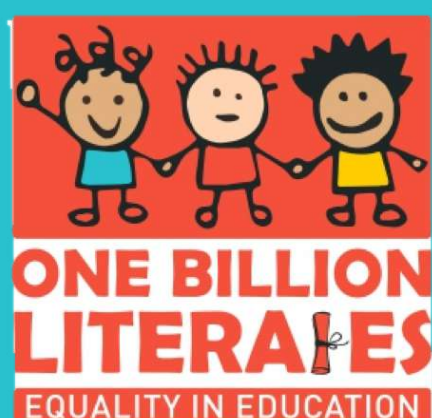
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This is different kind of field story from our usual ones; our stories are usually about what we see on the field. This one is about the incredible team that makes this all possible. This is one of the best teams I have been part of; probably the best – for the sheer selfless commitment and dedication that it brings each hour, each day, each week; often at risk to themselves.

As with any good team each person has an assigned role; but as anyone who has worked in a high performing team knows, that alone is not enough. For a team to move from good to great, you need members who have an intuitive understanding of what is needed, will assume responsibility without being asked, and will take decisions based on what is most important for the constituency we are serving. That is what this team from OBLF is all about.

On the front-lines are our para-teachers and supervisors – Anand, Antony, Padma, Bharathi, Kavitha, Shilpa, Ranjini and Vinutha; leading this motley crowd and inspiring them is our incredible Program Manager, Mahesh Shetty. Ensuring our stories are heard loud and clear and in the most compelling manner is our amazingly creative and talented Faiza Khan. Any endeavour like this needs to be tightly managed, ensuring we are keeping all stakeholders informed, reaching out to constituents who have a stake in us – and the person for all seasons who does that amazingly well is our own redoubtable Ruby Kamdin; she described herself as the Foundation’s “foster-mother” – she is that and much more; and finally inspiring all of us all the time with her dedication to the cause is the Foundation’s founder, Anamika; locked down in distant Boston, she has been inspiring with her unwavering determination to make a difference to lives back here in India.

You – the readers and generous donors – will not recognize these names or know these faces. But these are the wonderful people who are bringing to life your dreams, your vision, your generosity; to them – our gratitude. There still is a lot to be done. The need continues to be immense. The pain immeasurable. To help One Billion Literates Foundation continue our mission to help populations on the margins stave off hunger and starvation, please donate!



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