

From the Spark to the Blaze

The two-year-old alternative publishing house is helping educate and sensitise children

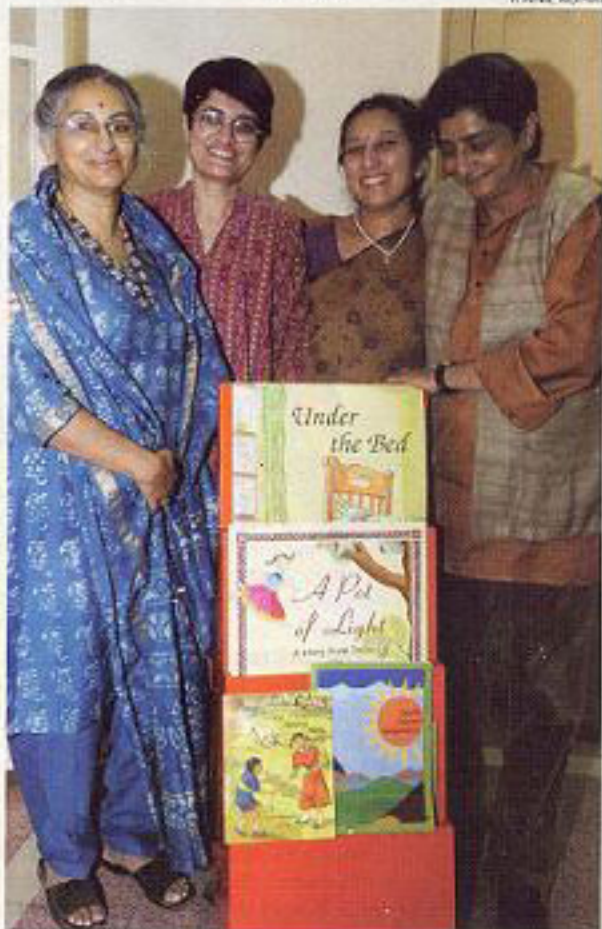
BY SAVITRI CHOUDHURY

A shared commitment to educate and a passion to create tools for students and teachers brought three women together and ignited the idea of Spark-India. The Hyderabad-based alternative publishing house is less than two-years-old and has already published over half-a-dozen titles; each a labour of several hours of brainstorming between the authors and the publishing team.

Each of the series brought out by Spark-India has certain defined objectives. The latest Empathy Series, for instance, is aimed at sensitising children towards people with disabilities and teaching them tolerance without moralising or preaching. "Children are naturally sensitive to differences but need knowledge also to make them tolerant and aware of people with special needs," says Tanvir Iqbal, a Spark-India partner and a speech therapist. She says there are no easy answers while dealing with issues such as these so it's best to describe the story as it is and let children decide on their own.

The Helping Hand, the first book in the Empathy Series, tells the story of growing up with disability. "We didn't want to label the disability. We just describe the person as someone who needs special education and socialises in a specific way," says author Kamakshi Balasubramanian. The story is woven around a young girl, Komal, as she struggles to come to grips and gradually grows to accept her brother Tarun, who is born with disability.

A second book, focusing on hearing disability but again without naming it, is in the pipeline. "In the old days, parents of children with disability would squirm and hide them away. Today, attitudes have changed and these children are becoming more visible," says Iqbal. Besides bringing out books to sensitise children about physical disability, Spark-India is also planning books with stories on issues



From left: Kamakshi Balasubramanian, Tanvir Iqbal, Sheel, Lakshmi Rameshwar Rao

such as single motherhood, adoption and single parenting.

Spark-India has been the pioneer in bringing out local stories in the globally successful Big Book format. These simple stories with enlarged

text and colourful illustrations enable children in a class to "share" a book and enjoy the story together. As the children can see the text easily, it helps develop their reading skills.

That's a huge plus, given our overcrowded classrooms, under-qualified and underpaid teachers and lack of libraries. Another major

issue is that in countries such as India, children are expected to learn a language other than their mother tongue. "This is why it becomes important to have inputs that engage the children and help them learn without setting any fixed rules. A shared book, for instance, due to its format, makes it easier for a child to recognise words and patterns and develop an early interest in reading and books," says Lakshmi Rameshwar Rao, a school-teacher and one of the three women initiators behind Spark-India.

Rao has herself authored two geography resource books for age groups 7 to 10 and 11 to 12. These are richly illustrated reference books, packed with information in an easy-to-understand format. "Though these books are for students in primary schools, we had an enquiry from Pune where they wanted to use the book for MSc students," says Rao. She claims

students of physical geography often end up with weak basics because of the bland textbooks used in classes.

This is the case with other subjects too. While there's a growing number of books for children by Indian authors now, educational publishing for children remains bleak with kids being subjected to dull texts and no reference material at all, except the standard encyclopaedias. Spark-India is committed to change that, even though such niche publishing can prove to be an economically daunting challenge, says Rao. Besides its books, Spark-India also produces and edits *Teacher Plus*, which, they say, is the only magazine meant for teachers in India.

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