Case Study

Tara Akshar+
Women Literacy Programme

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TARA Akshar Plus (+) is an innovative literacy programme that is transforming the lives of rural women all over the country. Hoping to improve the low literacy rate amongst Indian women and provide them with opportunities for sustainable livelihoods, the unique laptop based functional literacy programme, teaches rural illiterate and semi-literate women to read and write in Hindi, and carry out basic numeric calculations.

TARA Akshar+ is an initiative of the Development Alternatives (DA) Group, a not-for-profit organisation that has been working in the field of sustainable livelihoods for the past 25 years. TARAhaat Information and Marketing Services Ltd., the ICT arm of DA, developed the TARA Akshar+ software in 2004-2006. Today, rural women are educated in just 98 contact hours with the software.

The software is based on a unique visual memory technique, where memory hooks are created for each and every letter in the Hindi alphabet. Through the help of computer animations, each letter is associated with a single object that the women use in their daily lives. This linkage helps rural women to learn the alphabets quickly.

TARA Akshar + is successfully taking literacy to the learner. The software is simple – anyone who has passed their tenth standard can be easily trained to teach with it. Through the use of computer animations, flashcards and playing cards, instructors are able to train the students in merely 49 days of 2 hour classes daily. Students alternate between reading and writing lessons.

A well-structured programme design and an extensive operational plan - from selecting instructors to conducting classes, to monitoring via a sophisticated management information system (MIS), have resulted in a high degree of efficiency. Covering the entire Hindi speaking belt of the country (Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttarkhand), it has succeeded in educating approximately 58,000 rural women with a dropout rate of 1 percent.

Its impact has been so great that the Ministry for Human Resource Development (MOHRD) is in the process of integrating TARA Akshar+ into the agenda of the National Literacy Mission, a central government scheme that aims to make 80 million adults between the ages of 15 to 35 literate over an 80 year period.

This document captures the objective, operational design and implementation procedure of the programme. By highlighting its impact and achievements, this document aims to assist in the replication of such an initiative.
BACKGROUND

ILLITERACY IN INDIA

Although considered some of India’s most significant assets, the extensive amount of human capital and resources cannot be fully harnessed due low levels of literacy. The literacy rate in India is approximately 68 percent – very low in comparison to other developing countries. Moreover, official estimates tend to ignore the semi-literates who are unable to read contracts, newspapers, official forms or comprehend essential documents.

The gender disparity in literacy rates exasperates the alarming situation; an estimated 76.9 percent of men are literate while only 54.5 percent of women are said to be.¹

Female literacy is closely linked with problems of population growth and poor health. Various government and civil society institutions are undertaking efforts to tackle this issue, however population growth and the challenges it brings with it make it difficult to do so.

TARA Akshar+ stands out as one of the few programmes that has successfully managed to make a difference in the face of these problems.

TARA AKSHAR +: ENABLING WOMEN TO READ

TARA Akshar+ is an initiative of Development Alternatives (DA) Group a not-for-profit organisation which has been working in the field of sustainable livelihoods for the past 25 years.

TARA Akshar+ has worked to empower rural households since its inception in 2007. With the belief that once literate, a woman has the potential to improve the social and economic conditions of the entire household, TARAhaat Information and Marketing Services Ltd. (ICT branch of DA) developed a digital functional literacy and basic arithmetic programme. It focuses on teaching rural women basic Hindi reading, writing and counting skills.

Rural women are often consumed by household chores, thus it was determined important to design a short-term duration programme that would not interfere with daily activities for an extended period of time. DA also approached experts in the field of adult psychology to gain insight into how adults can learn in a fast and effective manner. From their findings, DA

developed a step-by-step programme where students begin with recognition of letter sounds and then move on to syllables, words and sentences.

TARA Akshar operates teaching centres throughout the Hindi speaking belt of the country which includes Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi NCR region, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand.

OBJECTIVE
TARA Akshar aims:
• To use information communication technologies to develop innovative mechanisms to fight female illiteracy.
• To train illiterate and semi-literate rural women to read and write in Hindi and complete basic numeric calculations.
• To contribute towards creating sustainable livelihood opportunities and the social/economic upliftment of women

WORKING DESIGN
THE SOFTWARE
TARA Akshar+ software was developed by the TARAhalt team in 2004-2006. The design of the programme is based on two concepts: a) advanced memory techniques and b) strong learning enforcement mechanisms. These concepts work on the principle of creating memory hooks which means that in order to enable the learners to read and write in a short time span, every letter in the Hindi Alphabet is associated with an everyday object.

The following two examples help to explain this approach:
2) The picture on the right shows the Hindi letter ‘Ta’. Here ‘Ta’ is associated with ‘Tamatar’ which is the Hindi word for tomato. ‘Tamatar’ begins with a ‘Ta’ and hence every time a student cooks with or eats a ‘Tamatar’ she will remember that it begins with the letter ‘Ta’.

Memory hooks through illustrations and animations are created for every letter of the Hindi alphabet and for the numbers zero through nine. The complete programme is fed into laptops which can then be easily taken to remote locations.

THE FINANCES

Before rolling out the programme, a detailed cost analysis was carried out by the DA team. A costing sheet was prepared which included all costs that would to be incurred in the implementation of the process i.e. stationery, teacher’s kits, learner’s kits, personnel maintenance and salaries. The cost per learner as it stands today is 4150 rupees. These are
covered by funds from donor agencies who agree to sponsor a certain number of students for a dedicated period of time.

**TRAINING TEACHERS**

The instructors who use the software to teach rural women are mostly local recruits. These instructors are required to be a minimum of 18 years old, with 10 years of schooling and strong communication skills. They are then trained via the authorised TARA Akshar+ instructor’s course. This training lasts for 15 days wherein they are taught:

- How to control students and how to communicate with them
- How to use a computer
- How to use the TARA Akshar software
- How to deal with difficult or slow students
- How to mobilise students

**PROCESS FLOW IN THE FIELD**

**DURATION**

TARA Akshar+ teaches rural women to read and write in Hindi, and basic numeric calculations through two hour classes for a period of 49 days. In other words, in 98 contact hours it transforms an illiterate or semi-literate woman into a literate person.
STUDENTS

Interested students are approached through a survey and organised into separate batches based on their level of literacy. One batch of students consists of 8 to 10 women; the small group size makes it possible to pay attention to each individual student. Three batches are taught per day.

TARA AKSHAR CENTRES

Classes are held at TARA Akshar centres whose location is decided based on accessibility and convenience of the women. Sometimes there are volunteers who allow classes to be held in their houses. Classes are also held in open community spaces.

TEACHING TECHNIQUES

Students are taught with the help of laptops, flash cards and special playing cards. Computer animations tell stories wherein the letters become the story characters. Every episode highlights six letters.
EVALUATING THE STUDENTS

During the final two weeks of courses, students are given a two hour exam that tests their reading speed and comprehension. These exam papers are sent to the head office in Delhi for marking.

GRADUATION CEREMONY

After passing their exams, students are given certificates and congratulated at a graduation ceremony where they recite poetry, sing and deliver speeches.

AFTER GRADUATION

In order to ensure that students continue to learn, reading clubs are organised after the end of the course. These are informal interactions where the students can read, write and engage with each other using TARA Akshar provided club materials.
MONITORING

INTERNAL MONITORING

Programme staff members are monitored at every level. There are four levels of personnel involved:

- The Delhi Head Office holds the ultimate monitoring authority
- A group of Master Trainers train local instructors and oversee their work.
- Every three Monitoring Coordinators report to one master trainer.
- Below the coordinators are the Instructors. Every five instructors report to one monitoring coordinator.

In this way, the system supports checks and balances at every level. Monitoring ensures efficient delivery of services.

MONITORING STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

In order to track a student’s learning over time, instructors input the student details into a Management Information System (MIS).

These details include: how many hours the class is held for, what object the student used for learning (computer, cards etc.), how many letters learned, and the length of time spent writing. Recordkeeping of students’ progress also helps to determine the performance level of instructors. Student exam papers are also archived at the head office.

METHODOLOGY

Working with the objective of identifying for replication best practices in governance, the OneWorld team concluded upon TARA Akshar + for documentation. With its focus on creating sustainable livelihood opportunities by improving the basic literacy level of women, the programme was determined to be innovative, unique and economically and socially sustainable.

After establishing TARA Akshar + as a best practice, the team then conducted thorough secondary research using web resources to see how the initiative works. The next step was to identify the key stakeholders and schedule interviews with them to develop a deeper understanding of operations and impact of the initiative.
KEY STAKEHOLDERS

• Development Alternatives Group (DA): DA is an Indian non-for profit organisation working in the field of sustainable livelihoods since 1983. It initiated the development of TARA Akshar+ and now is responsible for its operations and monitoring across the country.
• TARAhaat Information and Marketing Services Ltd: TARAhaat, the ICT arm of DA developed and designed the easy to teach and learn TARA Akshar+ software.
• ReadingWise Ltd: A UK-India based company that produces literacy and language products. ReadingWise developed TARA Akshar+ jointly with TARAhaat.2
• Funding Agencies: DFID - PACS programme, Oxfam India Trust, Telecentre.org- a joint initiative of Canadian & Swiss Governments and Microsoft, Connect for Change UK, Suzlon Foundation and TARAhaat Information & Marketing Services Ltd.
• Ministry of Human Resource Development of India is supporting the TARA Akshar+ programme in Jaipur, Rajasthan; Dehradun, Uttarakhand; and Haryana to potentially highlight it under the National Literacy Mission.

LESSONS LEARNED

A UNIQUE INNOVATION

The TARA Akshar + programme has been developed and implemented in an extremely fresh and innovative way. It takes into account local factors and time constraints. It effectively utilizes visual imagery and memory techniques that result in effective retention and reinforcement of taught content. This technique of learning by memory hooks rather than by rote ensures that students remember what they have learnt even after the completion of the course.

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2 The TARA Akshar programme was created by Victor Lyons of ReadingWise as product manager in TARAhaat and developed with the TARAhaat team.
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EASY TO USE AND LEARN

TARA Akshar + does not need expert instructors and hence does not entail a complicated training process. It takes literacy to the learner. It is an easy-to-use software with basic content. The learning process is gradual - beginning with a strong foundation for letter learning, then syllables, and finally words. This makes it easy to grasp the concepts clearly and systematically.

FULLPROOF IMPLEMENTATION

A well-structured programme design and implementation plan has resulted in very high pass out rates. Every level of operations is pre-planned- from locating students to the graduation ceremonies. Various levels of supervision exist and a MIS tracks the progress of all students. The database helps to record the exact number of enrolments, drop-outs, failures and pass outs. It also helps to ensure transparent operations and make field officers accountable.

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Since its roll out, TARA Akshar + has established about 400 centres and educated up to 58,000 rural women with a pass out rate of 97 percent. Only 1 percent of its students drop out. The programme gives rural women confidence in brighter future prospects.

By educating women, the software helps to empower the entire rural household and spread awareness about the importance of education.
32 year old Maina Devi of Uttar Pradesh never thought that she would get to study. But TARA Akshar+ changed her life. In just 49 days, she was taught how to read and write. At the end of the course she wrote a thank you note to DA expressing her gratitude.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

With the success that TARA Akshar+ has achieved, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MOHRD) has been considering its integration into the National Literacy Mission (NLM). In order to do so, the Directorate of Adult Education, technical advisor to the
government, conducted a detailed evaluation of the programme and found that it was technically sound and feasible.

Thereafter, the Ministry has begun a round of validation through support of TARA Akshar + centres in Jaipur, Dehradun and Haryana.

The Jaipur centre has just finished giving the course to 28 women with the help of the State Resource Centre. A report is now underway to determine the impact of the Jaipur experience. Similarly, 60 women are being educated through 2 government sponsored centres in Dehradun, and another 30 women are getting training in a centre in Haryana. On the basis of the results of these three experiences, the Ministry will decide to make TARA Akshar + a part of the NLM.

This institutionalisation is reflective of the strength and success of TARA Akshar+ in delivering educational services. Once it is incorporated into the NLM, the model will be financially sustainable and hence, also easily replicable. Overcoming the challenges of mobilising local support and student interest, TARA Akshar + has come a long way. A post graduate programme for skill enhancement of rural women is in the pipeline.

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REFERENCES

TARA Akshar + Brochure 2007

www.taraakshar.com

Interviews were held with the Development Alternatives team in New Delhi.
APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Development Alternative Group
1. Can you tell us about the objective of the programme? What was the motivation behind it? When did the initiative begin?
2. Who are the key stakeholders in the initiative? What are their respective roles?
3. Which states does the programme function in?
4. How was the Tara Akshar software developed? How does the programme function in terms of technique and content of teaching, selection of students, duration of the course and infrastructure?
5. How are the instructors recruited? Is there a specific training procedure for them?
6. Are the students tested at the end of the programme?
7. What is the financial model of the programme? Recently the Ministry of Human resource development rolled out the Tara Akshar programme as a part of the National Literacy Mission in Jaipur. How is this attempt different from Tara Akshar’s independent projects?
8. What are the major achievements of the initiative? Has there been any monitoring and evaluation from your side to access its impact?
9. What were the major challenges in implementing this programme? How were they overcome?
10. Are their plans for any enhancements in the future? Is the government planning to open such learning centres in other states?