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HOW A NON-PROFIT IS USING THE MAGIC OF STORYBOOKS TO CHANGE THE LIVES OF THOUSANDS OF ORPHANS

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The Cambridge English Dictionary defines fairy tales as a 'traditional story written for children that usually involves imaginary creatures and magic'. Whether it is Mowgli's lively relationship with the jungle and his upbringing with a pack of wolves, Snow White's friendship with the dwarfs and the magic mirror, Peter Pan's ability to fly and his never-ending adventures, or Rapunzel's magic-filled childhood and extremely long hair: all of these stories and many more are filled with magic and an element of innocence and escapism characterised by its protagonist. These stories call for imagination and thinking, for they go beyond the realm of possibility and provide their readers with a new world, waiting to be explored.

Another thing in common with the above mentioned four characters is that all of them are orphans or are being raised as one. There are hardship, struggle and trauma, waiting to be overcome. And a lot of the similar struggle and trauma was faced by Seena Jacob and the thousands of kids she works with on her US-based non-profit organization called 'Bookwallah'. Bookwallah, as the name suggests, distributes storybooks around the world specifically to orphans or kids who have faced trauma and also creates a library for the kids to access books regularly to improve their life and imagination through books.

Seena initially worked in fields such as banking, finance, innovation and ideation with various American companies. Despite living in the USA for almost all of her childhood, she did complete her graduation from India, something which re-familiarize her with her Indian roots. It started a little fire which would turn into a burning passion and later her full-fledged profession as she was unsatisfied with her current job and went for a little soul searching around 2009-10. Seena herself had faced trauma in her childhood but found joy



and life in various fairytales as they provided her with much-needed escapism. This experience, her undying love for books and want to achieve the same with other kids prompted her to think of a concept like 'Bookwallah'.

As a concept-tester, she took a soul-searching trip to Mumbai in 2010 where she simply planned to distribute books to orphans. Seeing the spark in the children's eyes when they received the books and the warmth and joy they transmitted, turned her concept into reality and ended her soul searching as she left her job after this trip and dedicated herself full-time to this initiative. While she was buzzing off the success of the first trip, she did receive a worrisome call within few weeks from Mumbai stating the distributed books are locked in a cupboard and the children have stopped reading. This called for a revamp as Seena and her team realised that the biggest challenge is not to distribute books but to sustain reading among children. This led to an innovation

wherein the organization signed a partnership agreement with orphanages which would allow them to construct a library in its premises and conduct weekly reading sessions with the kids by Bookwallah volunteers. Design is given utmost importance when constructing the library as the ambience of a place can dictate a person's state of mind in the room. It is painted in bright colours and drawings to attract children. A normal reading session conducted by the volunteer doesn't involve merely reading the text but re-enactment of it such that the children live through the story. Various activities related to the story are conducted in the session like skits, games, movies or even field trips to provide the kids with an immersive and wholesome experience. This system was specifically designed for Indian kids and is currently running successfully in 18 orphanages and one deaf school in the country with over 100 volunteers. It allows the

children to dip their toes into an entirely new world far away from the real one and in turn provides them the strength to cope with their own harsher reality. For this system to be successful, a huge amount of time and resources is invested in the screening and selection process of the volunteers as they are directly in contact with the children. The volunteers come from different backgrounds and age-group but a common purpose and desire and few have also transitioned into full-time employment at the non-profit itself. Seena and other co-founders truly believe that they are at the heart of this operation and plan to increase their number to 200 in the upcoming year.

The impact of this initiative has been wide-ranging. While the library-orphanage model has only been implemented in India, 'Bookwallah' has also extended

its operation in other countries including Colombia, Ghana, Bangladesh, Indonesia and their base USA, with each having a unique program accustomed to the local conditions. So far they have impacted over 2500 children plus thousands more through their global philanthropy network and hope to reach over one million kids in the next ten years. While numbers provide us scale and progression of the project, to gauge its real impact, we need to go beyond them and understand the human impact. A 12-year-old girl who was sexually abused by her father, shunned by her own family, managed to climb out of this black hole due to the intervention of 'Bookwallah'. The books saved her life as they brought her courage, passion and confidence to transition from victim to victor. And that is the journey that this non-profit aims to set for millions of kids throughout the world. It is also the journey that Seena has been on since those days of trauma during her childhood. Today she wants to widen her operations to also include more differently-abled children while projecting to open 300 library projects in the next ten years. Her journey is far from over, in fact looking at the projections; it might just be the beginning.

It was characters like Snow White, Mowgli, Peter Pan and Rapunzel which set her on this journey. And now she is using the same characters to inspire a million others on a similar journey. These stories were fairytales full of magic and wonder. Seena and her team have ensured that thousands of kids around the world feel the same magic and wonder through storybooks, which they were earlier devoid of. The journey from victim to victor continues.

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