

'Hole-in-the-wall' experiment is *Slumdog*... inspiration

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NEW DELHI: *Slumdog Millionaire*, undoubtedly, is the toast of the season. But, barely anybody knows that a gang of illiterate slum children from Kalkaji in South Delhi and a prodigious computer scientist were the inspiration behind the book that this much-talked-about film is based on.

It started on the Republic Day in 1999 when NIIT scientist Sugata Mitra created a hole in the wall that separated the NIIT headquarters in Kalkaji from a slum and put up a freely-accessible computer for anybody to use.

Slum kids were attracted almost immediately. Most of them did not have formal education; they did not know English and had hardly ever seen a computer. They thought it was a new toy and started playing with it.

To everybody's surprise, it was found that those illiterate kids had taken just a few weeks to learn how to operate a computer. Without any assistance they were able to use various applications such as word processor and paint brush.



Sugata with slum children and the experiment set-up.

Encouraged by the success of the Kalkaji "hole-in-the-wall" experiment, Mitra and his team went ahead in setting up two more "hole-in-the-wall" computers in Shivpuri (a town in Madhya Pradesh) and Madantusi (a village in Uttar Pradesh).

The findings from Shivpuri and Madantusi confirmed Kalkaji results — the children picked up computer skills on their own.

At this point, the International Finance Corporation (an arm of the World Bank) tied up with NIIT to spread the hole-in-the-wall experiment to other parts of the country as well as outside.

One of the interesting findings was in any place, the learning pattern for the slum kids is the same.

The experiment raises questions on the role of the teacher in a computerised environment, and how children can learn themselves, if provided with computer and Internet connections.

More than 3,00,000 children have benefited from 300 hole-in-the-wall stations in the last eight years. The programme has reached other parts of South Asia, besides Africa.

While writing his novel *Q&A*, the source of the acclaimed film, its author, Vikas Swarup, was inspired by the pedagogy experiment.

"I was inspired by the experiment. It got me fascinated, and I realised there was an innate ability in everyone to do something extraordinary, provided they were given an opportunity," Swarup said.

"The experiment was meant to create a mechanism for giving opportunity to young people who did not have formal education. The novel's success and the film validate that seed of idea," NIIT chairperson Rajendra Pawar told *Deccan Herald*.