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Making India Literate, Fully and Functionally

Introduction

Amid a pat for marching towards the measurable “Education for All” goals, the chastisement that India has the world’s largest illiterate population and that the poverty-stricken women in India will take 65 years to attain literacy should make all those who have stake in India’s development sit up and pull up their socks.

A major thrust has been made in each decade since Independence to spread literacy in India. Major initiatives include Social Education (1952), Farmers’ Training and Functional Literacy Programme (1967–68), and National Adult Education Programme (1977–78). Then in 1988, the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi inaugurated the ambitious National Literacy Mission (NLM) that envisaged making 30 million Indians literate by 1990 and 50 millions more literate by 1995. Using unprecedented techno-pedagogic inputs, NLM initiatives began across the country.

The initiatives, especially NLM, bore results but they were less than satisfactory. An example from Gujarat makes it clear. A review,¹ commissioned by the Government of Gujarat and carried out by Sardar Patel Institute of Economic and Social Research declared 15 out of 21 districts fully literate. Remarkably this review was commissioned when a government-commissioned review² by Gujarat Institute of Development Research earlier in the same year reported less than satisfactory progress in the state’s Gandhinagar district.

The ground reality was affirmed in 1999 when Action India, a non-government organisation floated by some well meaning influential non-resident Indians, identified literacy as an area to work in.³ Sam Pitroda,

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the technocrat credited with conceiving NLM, was the driving force behind Action India. By 2003, the Government of Gujarat which had claimed total literacy in 15 out of 21 districts, officially recognised the state's literacy scene as one of the poorest in the country and appointed a core group headed by a UNESCO consultant to look into the problem. The idea, obviously, was to make future literacy initiatives more effective. NLM was followed up by Post-Literacy Programme in districts across the country.

In 2009, the federal government floated another literacy initiative: Saakshar Bharat Mission (SBM). The Government of Gujarat tried to make the most of it and launched massive campaign to attain 100 per cent literacy on its Swarnim Gujarat (golden jubilee) celebration year, 2010. Sounds ambitious. But then that is how Prime Minister Narendra Modi appends his signature to projects. (He was the chief minister of Gujarat then.)

Before the launch of SBM, India's literacy rate was 65.4 per cent (Census-2001). Census India-1951 had reported literacy figure of 18.3 per cent. This means an effective growth of a shade above 37 percentage points in 50 years! Kothari, et al⁴ report that actual figure could be 10 percentage points less, i.e., around 55 per cent. This makes the picture that much more dismal.

Understanding Literacy

Illiteracy has been a matter of concern for more than a century. The concern has led to hectic activities at times but rarely sustained long enough to materially alter the numbers of the illiterate population in several parts of the world. There have been several approaches to literacy: religious⁵, socio-cultural⁶, political-economic⁷, to name a few. Literacy has also been projected as a right of the people. Literacy has been defined in various ways. UNESCO sees it as

(...) a characteristic acquired by individuals in varying degrees from just above none to an indeterminate upper level. Some individuals are more literate or less literate than others, but it is really not possible to speak of literate and illiterate persons as two distinct categories.⁸

Gray⁹ and Levine¹⁰ have focused on the functional aspect. For Gray a person is functionally literate if he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group. However, Wagner¹¹ quotes Levine to say that a functional competence in literacy has been defined so that it is merely sufficient to bring its possessor within the reach of bureaucratic modes of communication and authority.

Defining literacy poses some problem, indeed with a horde of experts expressing their views on it. However, there is an agreement that it connotes aspects of reading and writing while the debate continues on what specific abilities or knowledge count as literacy. To Galtung¹² literacy is that skill which leads to making people conscious; to Freire¹³ it should lead to conscientisation.

Functional Literacy

Of late the term being used the world over in innumerable campaigns is “functional literacy.” “Functional literacy” was first discussed internationally by Gray¹⁴ in his survey of reading and writing: A person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group.¹⁵

This definition, as can be seen, is relativistic, for it sets varying standard of literacy for varied societies. So what should be termed functional literacy in a democratic society is perhaps that skill which leads to the voluntary participation of masses in the social and democratic processes.¹⁶

The concept of literacy and indeed many UNESCO development programmes have been significantly influenced by writings on social change and development. Lerner¹⁷ saw a causal relationship between literacy and such attributes as “empathy” and “cosmopolitanness,” while Kuppuswamy¹⁸ found literacy essential in getting additional information, through channels other than electronic, vital for national development.

Lerner, in fact, looks upon literacy as a prime mover in the process of modernisation. This is what has come to be known as the UNESCO view of literacy. It has been criticised by Freire and his followers who see the acquisition of literacy as an active process of consciousness, not just as the passive acquisition of content. The literacy process must raise the consciousness of the learner.

Praxis Approach to Literacy

There is one more approach: the praxis approach to literacy. This approach treats literacy as more than a mere skill to read and write. It is both a concept and a social practice. This approach sees literacy as a link between knowledge and power on one hand and the political and cultural struggle over language and experience on the other. Antonio Gramsci was perhaps the first thinker to see literacy along these lines.

For Gramsci, literacy was double-edged sword; it could be wielded for the purpose of self and social empowerment or for the perpetuation of relation of repression and domination. As a terrain of struggle, Gramsci believed that critical literacy had to be fought for both as an ideological construct and as a social movement. As an ideology, literacy had to be viewed as a social construction that is always implicated in organising one's view of history, the present and the future....¹⁹

On the social front literacy helps to develop and organise teachers, community workers and others, both, within and outside school.²⁰ As a social movement literacy becomes part of a larger struggle over the orders of knowledge, values and social practices that must be established if democratic institutions and democratic society were to succeed.

Freire's is perhaps the only theoretical proposition which affirms and extends the tradition of critical literacy developed by radical theorists like Gramsci. It is only when the learner becomes equipped to make meaning of the messages conveyed to him that he or she starts reading the word and the world, as Freire and Macedo²¹ put it.

It is now established that there are various paths to making of literate societies and that there exists not a single path which is destined to succeed in spreading literacy among the masses.²² Sweden achieved mass literacy without formal schooling, economic development or instructions in writing. The church played a big role and parents played a perfect foil.

The cases of America,²³ and England²⁴ are equally revealing. But most revolutionary of them all are the literacy campaigns carried out in some Latin American countries. The campaigns were based on Freire's ideas.

Freire's concern with literacy is essentially social and political which, needless to say, has drawn flak from his critics. His preoccupation with conscientising a group or a community and at a larger scale the population presumes lower level of awareness among the poor, that they do not understand their own situation, that they are in need of enlightenment on the matter and that this service could be provided by selected higher-class individuals.²⁵

While any effort by the dominated group to break free from the culture of silence is likely to be opposed by the dominating group, there is a broad consensus, definitely so in the manifestos of most of the political parties, to bring about a transformation. The first step in this process of transformation is conscientisation which can be done only through imparting literacy and problem posing education. Care has to be taken during literacy initiatives that they do

not involve just syllabification of a, e, i, o, u, but lead to a debate on people's participation in the transformation process itself.

Unfortunately in India this debate has sought to be stifled, as experiences in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat and the Union Territory of Pondicherry show. These have been discussed elsewhere.²⁶ Suffice to say here that the State intervened to put a stop to any debate on people's participation in the transformation process in Andhra Pradesh and Pondicherry. In Gujarat where Gujarat Vidyapith, a deemed university which was selected as the nodal agency for the Government of India's most ambitious literacy campaign so far – National Literacy Mission, chose to evaluate the learners'/neo-literates' progress only on the alpha-numeric front, ignoring the debate on people's participation in social transformation or development process.

Literacy Policies and their Implementation

A study of literacy has to go beyond purely social realm and take into account political and economic factors, including power structure, policies of the ruling elite, implementation of those policies and the delivery system. Efforts have been made by individuals and organisations even before independence to spread literacy among the people.

Attempts at spreading literacy in India have a chequered history straddling our independence. There have been literacy campaigns launched or sponsored by the state, intensive but localised efforts by voluntary groups and mass-based efforts in the context of larger socio-political movements.

Literacy itself has come to be seen differently by varied players at different points of time. The literacy that the students and the NSS instructors of urban colleges talk and impart to illiterates and the literacy that was the concern of the Andhra Mahasabha in 1940s in the Telangana region when *Golkunda Patrika* (a Telugu newspaper) which used to be smuggled into Telangana villages from Hyderabad may not be the same thing.²⁷

Today the Naxalite movement in Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh has, among other things, put health and education on its agenda. Activists carry plastic blackboards and pieces of chalk with arms and extremist literature, lending a much wider socio-political context to literacy efforts than the government sponsored campaigns aimed at imparting literacy and numeracy. Yet, 67 years after achieving Independence, poverty, illiteracy, disease and lack of minimum social services continue to affect tens of millions of our people.

The Economic Survey of 1996–97 of the Government of India sums up the results of literacy initiatives in India so far. The reasons for the less than satisfactory results have been discussed later in this chapter. Suffice it to point out here that when Sam Pitroda – the soul and spirit behind the conceiver of the most ambitious of the literacy initiatives, National Literacy Mission – made an abortive attempt to kick-start a non-governmental developmental initiative, christened Action India in 1999, he included spreading literacy as one of the core activities of the initiative.

Various literacy campaigns in India have had certain innovative features. These have followed the mass approach. Local people have participated in the planning and implementation of the campaign in their areas. These campaigns have elicited good voluntary response. Even religion-based organisations²⁸ have joined hands with implementing agencies, be they governmental or voluntary. Last but not the least, the entire effort has been decentralised with the formation of state, district, block (sub-divisional district) and panchayat (town and village council) level committees to implement and monitor the campaigns. Most importantly, wherever functional literacy has become a reality, even if partially, and has been identified with local issues and priorities, the literacy movement has made a deeper impact as in Nellore in Andhra Pradesh²⁹ and Pondicherry.³⁰

Efforts have been made by individuals and organisations even before independence to spread literacy among the people. The Indian Education Commission (1882–83) strongly recommended extending to all provinces the then existing night schools in Bombay, Madras and Bengal. The Industrial Revolution in England did have an impact on India while the emergence of jail school at Lucknow and Sultanpur was another important feature of this period.

Some of the notable works done in the pre-independence India in spreading literacy were by Bombay Adult Education Committee under BG Kher, literacy campaign of the University of Mysore, “Each one teach one” campaign in Moga in Punjab, Department of Adult Education of Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi where Dr Zakir Husain tried to teach illiterate people around the institution and Bengal Adult Education Society under Rabindranath Tagore.³¹

Social Education and Other Initiatives

After independence the first Union Education Minister Maulana Abul Kalam Azad changed the concept of adult education to “Social Education.” The broader concept of adult education got a gradual acceptance. CABE, at

its January 1948 meeting, appointed a sub-committee under the chairmanship of Mohan Lal Saxena. It stressed the need for general education to enable Indians to participate effectively in the new social order of the independent India.

The founding fathers of the nation were enlightened enough to put the responsibility of primary education on the State. It is envisaged under Article 45 of the Constitution of India that “the State shall endeavour to provide within a period of ten years from the commencement of the Constitution, free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14 years.”

As part of its meeting constitutional obligation, the Government of India has from time to time come out with education policies. Some of the highlights of the 1968 National Policy on Education were: relevance of education to societal needs, expansion of education, raising the quality of education, emphasis on promotion of science and technology, equality of opportunity, removal of regional imbalances, intensification of efforts to develop SCs, STs, women, minorities and backward classes.³²

National Education Policy of 1986 aimed at establishing a national system of education, attainment of success, introduction of open learning and distance education system, decentralised planning, school mapping, involving community, voluntary organisations and teachers in decision making, ensuring Centre-State partnership, Navodaya Vidyalaya, village education committees, District Institutes of Education and Training and vocational education.

Farmers’ Training and Functional Literacy Programme

Farmers’ Training and Functional Literacy Programme was the second major literacy programme after Social Education. The programme was started in 1967–68 as an inter-ministerial project. It was implemented jointly by the Ministries of Agriculture, Education and Information and Broadcasting. It was assumed that there was direct correlation between physical and human ingredients in agriculture, and between agriculture inputs and the upgrading of human resources.

This was an integrated approach to a comprehensive rural development programme, to the “Green Revolution”, the goal being to support and strengthen one of the basic national objectives: self-sufficiency in food, increase in crop production, and growth of agricultural productivity. The functional literacy was viewed as more than a literacy programme.

National Adult Education Programme

The Draft Policy Statement on Adult Education and the Outline of the National Adult Education Programme were prepared in 1977–78. Topping the priority list were planning for adult education and universalisation of elementary education. As a follow-up action a nationwide adult education programme was launched on 2 October 1978. It aimed at providing adult education to 10 crore adults over a period of five years with a view to enabling them to play a role in social, economic and cultural changes so that social justice and equity was achieved.

The programme had three main components: (i) awareness, (ii) functional development, and (iii) literacy. However, the performance of the NAEP in the first year was not up to the mark.

First of all the pseudo-radical phraseology used in the beginning for boosting the NAEP ('liberation of the poor', 'conscientisation', 'learning-cum-action group') is now definitely out, leaving in the field only the conventional literacy, functionality and 'awareness.' The last whatever it means, is the only reminder of the radical -revolutionary noises of the pre-preparatory period.³³

National Literacy Mission

National Literacy Mission³⁴ for eradication of illiteracy was launched on 5 May 1988. The focus of NLM was essentially the same as that of many earlier programmes: spreading literacy; yet it differed from the earlier ones in that it was a technical and societal mission. The scientific and technological advancements that the country had made in all these years gave the planner the confidence to launch the ambitious project which aimed at making 80 million people literate.

Launching National Literacy Mission, the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said that the mission was aimed at

(...) spreading literacy to every nook and corner of the country.... By making this literacy programme into a mission, we will bring numerous agencies into the project.... It has to be a programme of all the ministries, of the whole nation. This programme must get cooperation and collaboration from major public sector undertakings, from the many bodies that are involved with the technologies used for spreading education.³⁵

This clearly spells out the broad policy of NLM. It aimed at being broad-based and involving voluntary as well as governmental agencies in imparting literacy to people between 15 and 35.

The NLM document of the Union Human Resources Development Ministry³⁶ contains the main objectives of the mission: impart functional literacy to 80 million illiterate persons in 15–35 age group – 30 million by 1990 and additional 50 million by 1995. It then explains what “functional literacy” implies: achieving self-reliance in literacy and numeracy; becoming aware of the causes of their deprivation and moving towards amelioration of their condition through organisation, and participation in the process of development; acquiring skills to improve the economic status and general well being; imbibing the values of national integration, conservation of the environment, women’s equality, observance of small family norms, etc.³⁷

According to the document, basic requisites for the success of the mission were (i) national commitment; (ii) creation of an environment conducive to learning; (iii) motivation of learners and teachers; (iv) mass mobilisation and people’s involvement; (v) techno-pedagogic inputs; and (vi) efficient management and monitoring.³⁸

Saakshar Bharat Mission

Saakshar Bharat, the new variant of earlier NLM, a centrally sponsored scheme of Department of School Education and Literacy (DSEL), Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India (GoI), was launched on the International Literacy Day, 8 September 2009, with the following goals: to raise literacy rate to 80 per cent, to reduce gender gap to 10 per cent and minimise regional and social disparities, with focus on women, SCs, STs, minorities, other disadvantaged groups. All those districts that had female literacy rate below 50 per cent (as per census 2001) including “Left wing extremism-affected districts” (irrespective of literacy level) are being covered under the programme.

Government expects increase in female literacy to become a force multiplier for all other social development programmes. However, this is only the instrumental value of female literacy. Its intrinsic value is in emancipating the Indian woman through the creation of critical consciousness to take charge of her environment where she faces multiple deprivations and disabilities on the basis of class, caste and gender.

The Mission goes beyond ‘3’ Rs (i.e. Reading, Writing & Arithmetic); for it also seeks to create awareness of social disparities and a person’s deprivation on the means for its amelioration and general well being. The Central and State Governments, Panchayati Raj Institutions, NGOs and Civil Society need to work in unison to realise dream to create a “literate India”. Saakshar Bharat

has been formulated in 2009 with the objective of achieving 80 per cent literacy level by 2012 at national level, by focusing on adult women literacy seeking to reduce the gap between male and female literacy to not more than 10 percentage points. The mission has four broader objectives, namely imparting functional literacy and numeracy to non-literates; acquiring equivalency to formal educational system; imparting relevant skill development programme; and promote a learning society by providing opportunities for continuing education. The principal target of the mission is to impart functional literacy to 70 million non-literate adults in the age group of 15 years and beyond. The mission will cover 14 million SCs, 8 million STs, 12 million minorities and 36 million others. The overall coverage of women will be 60 million. As many as 410 districts belonging to 26 States/UTs of the country have been identified to be covered under Saakshar Bharat.

A Critique of the Initiatives

The broad approach of Indian planners to literacy has been progressive since Independence. The progressive views have found place in concepts like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's "Social Education" shortly after Independence through National Literacy Mission launched by the then young Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1988. At least the objectives of the programme, if not the result, have come to be appreciated.³⁹

A survey of the initiatives in spreading literacy since Independence shows five major government programmes: Social Education, National Policy on Education, Farmers' Training and Functional Literacy Programme, national Adult Education Programme and National Literacy Mission. There is a little overlap in the launch and duration of the programmes, but each programme has had distinct focus while meant largely to serve the general national objective of spreading literacy. Meanwhile, there have been several localised efforts of voluntary agencies in spreading literacy. Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (Kerala), Community of Resource Organisation (Mumbai), Gujarat Vidyapith, to name a few, have made significant contribution to the cause.

Lessons Drawn

Thanks to the various programmes and missions, the literacy rate has risen to 72.99 per cent by 2011. It grew by 8.15 per cent points in the last decade (64.84 per cent net in 2001). The male literacy rate grew by 5.63 per cent points to 80.89 per cent in 2011 whereas female literacy rate swelled by 10.97 per cent points to 64.64 per cent. By 2011, the number of illiterates (7+ age group) decreased from 304.10 million in 2001 to 282.59 million.⁴⁰

UNESCO, in its “Education for All-2015” report is all praise for India’s progress on the literacy front. And why will it not be? Primary school net enrolment to attendance ratio for 2005–2010 was 95 per cent, primary school completion rate was 90 per cent, total youth literacy rate (15–24 years, 2005–2010) was 81 per cent and adult literacy rate (15 years and over, 2005–2010) was 63 per cent.

However, a careful look at the figures reveals the need for more concerted efforts to make the literacy programmes more inclusive. Among the youth (15–24 years), the male literacy rate was 88 per cent but female literacy rate was languishing at 74 per cent. Similarly, among the adult, while males recorded 75 per cent, female settled at a sad 51 per cent⁴¹ which means that nearly half of the women population cannot read and write. Overall, as cited above, male literacy rate is 80.89 per cent compared to female literacy rate of 64.64 per cent, which is a yawning gap of 16.25 percentage points.

Going by the present pace, India will take another 65 years to achieve female youth literacy, according to Education for All Global Monitoring Report (GMR) 2015. In a reflection on the deep-rooted gender-bias in Indian society, the richest young women in India have already achieved universal literacy, but the poorest are projected to only do so around 2080. The “huge disparities within India point to a failure to target support adequately towards those who need it the most.”⁴² India is placed at the bottom of three categories with Nepal, Bhutan, African and West Asian countries, which are still far from achieving 80 per cent literacy rate by 2015, and are moving at a slower pace.

What went wrong? As the contents of the programme have been found to be satisfactory, this author has elsewhere pointed out that apart from the gender bias, the delivery system has failed the initiatives.⁴³

Poor delivery system has also resulted in poor kids remaining illiterate despite four years of education, the UNESCO report said. Even after completing four years of school, 90 per cent of children from poorer households remain illiterate. And this also holds true for around 30 per cent of kids from poorer homes despite five to six years of schooling. Besides, only 44 per cent of rural students in the Std V age group in Maharashtra and 53 per cent in Tamil Nadu could perform two-digit subtraction.

Rationale for Literacy

Why the emphasis on literacy when the digital ear has set in? Is there a need for people to learn to read, write and do simple mathematical calculations,

when there are technological aids that can help those without basic literacy skills to record their views with the help of software and do the calculations with the help of calculators?

Education, formal or informal, is regarded as an essential ingredient for development. That literacy, too, is a necessary condition for development is yet to be accepted universally. The difference of opinion and approach can be divided into two categories. There are those⁴⁴ who believe that literacy can be bypassed with the help of audio-visual media and those⁴⁵ who feel that a certain level of literacy is still necessary for social and economic development. With market-based economic growth gaining in importance in the development models being followed in countries like India and China, which are opening up to global market, the importance of literacy and education is further accentuated.

Gujarat, indeed India, has made remarkable expansion in higher education. Relative to its population, India sends about six times as many students to universities and other seats of higher education as China does. But the lack of progress in the field of elementary education sticks out like a sore thumb.⁴⁶ The neglect of elementary education seems to be proportional to the attention higher education seems to have got.

(...) that gap has, if anything, grown rather than shrunk over the last 25 years. I had tried to argue that there were deep-seated class biases in the pressures that have determined Indian educational priorities, and that the inequalities in education are, in fact, a reflection of inequalities of economic and social powers of different groups in India. The educational inequalities both reflect and help to sustain social disparities, and for a real break, much more determined political action would be needed than has been provided so far by either those in office, or by the parties that have led the opposition.⁴⁷

While literacy and development of human ability and skill must not be valued only as instruments to other ends, their instrumental importance should be acknowledged nonetheless. Sen⁴⁸ has argued and established the importance of public education in growth-mediated social progress. For, public education could be both favourable to economic growth through expanding the opportunities of economic expansion and favoured by economic growth through generating more resources for such support.

Education and skill make it all the more essential to pay attention to public policy to expand basic education and to promote skill formation. Basic education has played a crucial role in the fast growth of East Asian economics, often

referred to as “tigers” – South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan – and China and Thailand.

“The modern industries in which these countries have particularly excelled demand many basic skills for which elementary education is essential and secondary education most helpful. While some studies have emphasised the productive contribution of learning by doing and on-the-job training, rather than the direct impact of formal education, the ability to achieve such training and learning is certainly helped greatly by basic education in schools prior to taking up jobs.”⁴⁹

The World Bank, too, has recognised these connections.

We have shown that the broad base of human capital was critically important to rapid growth in the HPAEs (high-performing Asian economies). Because HPAEs attained universal primary education early, literacy was high and cognitive skill levels were substantially above those in other developing economies. Firms, therefore, had an easier time upgrading the skills of their workers and mastering new technology.⁵⁰

Indeed,

The social opportunities offered by market-based economic growth, particularly of integration with modern world markets, are severely limited when a very large part of the community cannot read or write or count, cannot follow printed or hand-written instruction, cannot cope easily with contemporary technology, and so on.⁵¹

Economic growth and expansion being his prime concerns, along with welfare of the masses, Sen in the same volume highlights the role of attainments of pre-reform China in its post-reform success.

(...) we must resist the common tendency now to ‘rubbish’ what China had already done before the reforms. The spread of basic education across the country is particularly relevant in explaining the nature of Chinese economic expansion in the post-reform period.... The literacy rates in China by 1982 were already as high as 96 per cent for males in the 15-19 age group, and 85 per cent even for females in that age group. This social asset made participatory economic expansion possible in a way it would not have been in India then – and is extremely difficult in India even now.⁵²

Contrast this with the conditions in India and it follows that the persistence of endemic illiteracy and educational backwardness in India has many adverse effects.

It limits, in general, the freedom and well-being of the Indian masses, and has a direct role in then relative deprivation of women in particular. It sustains high levels of mortality and fertility rates. It contributes to the comparative lack of pressure for social change, and to the moderateness of political demand and pressure for effective public attention in such fields as health care. But, in addition, the lack of elementary education also makes the goals of economic expansion very much harder to realise.⁵³

There are differences over the quality of literacy that is required and the manner in which it should be imparted. While differences continue, it cannot be said that literacy, just as education, is a sufficient as well as necessary condition for development. At the same time it still cannot be said that audio-visual media will one day make reading and writing superfluous.

In fact, now it can be said with some degree of certainty that one cannot enter the new social and communication order without being literate. The storehouse of knowledge that the international computer network has made available to the humankind will only make the knowledge gap between those who have access to it and those who don't expand at an exponential rate.

“An illiterate person has hundreds of enemies: epidemics, hunger, disorder, humiliation.”⁵⁴ That is why any country in the modern world which allows as much as one-third of its population to continue in a state of illiteracy is being blind to the grave danger to its security and stability from within.

It is true that a number of skills can be learnt without literacy. It is also true that audio-visual media can increase the productivity of the illiterates and improve the quality of their life. But in developing countries the major need is not the development of new skills so much as improving existing skills, particularly in the agriculture sector, to increase per capita per acre productivity. Indeed,

(...) it is, of course, not a question of either-or, but of relative scale and emphasis – in other words, low productivity, in both agriculture and industry (the inadequate exercise of existing employed skills) is a far bigger and more crucial problem than that of unemployment (the inadequate opportunity to learn and apply new skills or traits).⁵⁵

Conclusion

Attaining total literacy is a goal that needs total political commitment which is often found in short supply. The literacy campaigns over the years were expected to help socially conscious and politically advanced forces to take root

in our society. Organic intellectuals, as Gramsci put it, would have emerged from among the neo-literates.

The literacy initiatives offered a democratic space to those activists who joined the programme as organisers or volunteers with the hope of using the limited space to try to open the space further. But our experiences have belied all these expectations, the reason being that the ruling political elite have seen to it that the teaching-learning process at the literacy centres remained firmly under their control.

Exaggerated claims of many state governments notwithstanding, literacy campaign has made impressive inroads into the country. It is also clear that the gains of the campaign could be sustained only through mass organisation of the poor, mass participation in social and economic development programmes and, of course, universalisation of primary education which is enshrined in our Constitution.

The dramatic change that universal primary education can bring about in the literacy level of community is well documented by Harewood.⁵⁶ Within a single generation the literacy rate of the community of the indentured Indian labourers in Trinidad had gone up from 23 per cent to 41 per cent with child literacy accounting for most of the increase. The reason was simple. All children went to school established for the community. Indeed mass illiteracy will die not the day the last illiterate adult is made literate, but when primary education in universalised and gender bias is overcome.

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Reading

 - (a) Reading aloud with normal accent simple passage on a topic related to the interest of the learners at a speed of 30 words per minute.
 - (b) Reading silently small paragraphs in simple language at a speed of 35 words per minute.
 - (c) Reading with understanding road signs, posters, simple instructions and newspapers for neo-literates, etc.
 - (d) Ability to follow simple written messages relating one's working and living environment.

Writing

 - (a) Copying with understanding at a speed of seven words per minute.
 - (b) Taking dictation at a speed of five words per minute.
 - (c) Writing with proper spacing and alignment.
 - (d) Writing independently short letters and applications and forms of day-to-day use of the learners.

Numeracy

 - (a) To read and write 1-100 numerals.

- (b) Doing simple calculations without fractions involving addition, subtraction up to three digits and multiplication and division by two digits. For more please refer to GOI, 1988, n. 36, pp. 54–55.
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