

LITERACY IN INDIA: PLANNING, PERSUASION AND PROSPECT

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Abstract The growth of literacy from 12% at the end of British rule to 75% in the census of 2011 the country has registered a greater than six-fold improvement but with current rate it would take until 2060 to achieve universal literacy. The Government of India along with states executed successful programmes to boost literacy rate, it needs deliberate steps to engage the various communities/agencies to succeed effectively with purpose. In globalisation the bright prospect of literacy demands policy intervention required for accelerating the expected results in sphere of literacy.

Keywords: Literacy, Mission, Planning, Implementation, Status.

Position Around Independence

In India's pre and post independence period, the main information on literacy was collected from censuses. In all the censuses, besides data on literacy, additional information was also collected. In 1872 the information about youths up to age 20 attending schools, college or under private tuition was recorded. In the census of 1881 the information was collected whether the individuals were under instruction or not, and if not, whether they were able to read and write. In the 1891 census, besides the information regarding the language in which the person was literate, the foreign language known was also recorded. From 1901 to 1941, the censuses contained an additional question whether the literate knew English or not. Information on the standard of education was collected for the first time in the 1941 census, and it was asked in every subsequent census. In fact, the Indian idea of education is historically based on what had been cultural literacy, an age-old folkloristic phenomenon, rarely found in subaltern societies elsewhere. The colonial educational setup, for long divergent, and later parallel to the local community-based systems, has now been taken to be the only viable system of educating the child for the postmodern socio-economic model. The gradual growth rate of free India reflects the significant steps independent India has taken to create a more literate society. For example, in 1901, the crude literacy rate was an insignificant 5.35 per cent.

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In 1951, this was still a dismal 16.67 per cent. In contrast with an 11.32 percentage point increase between 1901 and 1951, the crude literacy rate rose by 48.22 points between 1951 and 2011 with the 1991–2001 decade registering the highest growth rate of 11.67 percentage point.

Thus, post-independence India inherited a system of education, which was characterized by large scale and intra-regional imbalances. The system educated a few, leaving a wide gap between the educated and illiterate. The country's literacy rate in 1947 was only 14 per cent and female literacy was abysmally low at 8 per cent. Only one child out of three had an opportunity for enrolment in primary schools. Educational inequality was aggravated by economic inequality, gender disparity and rigid social stratification. In order to remove illiteracy, a number of significant programmes have been taken up since independence to eradicate. Every issue that our society faces is like the link of a chain. Each issue is connected to another, either directly or indirectly. The strongest link of that chain of issues of the society that we live in is illiteracy. Illiteracy is the mother of all issues as it gives birth to many other issues like poverty, unemployment, child labour, female foeticide, population burst and many more. India is developing, but at a very slow rate, and this is not the fault of a corrupt government; it is only a problem of illiteracy. Literacy enables a person to think rationally, to be understanding, to be more responsible and to make his/her own decisions. A literate person is aware of all his fundamental rights and duties. Literacy is the ultimate solution to fighting problems like communalism, terrorism and underdevelopment. Our government is of the people, for the people and by the people, but what is the use if people cannot even make the right choice? Illiteracy can bring even the most powerful nations down, so if we are to become a developed nation, the government should first remove the problem of illiteracy by introducing effective programmes with proper implementation and budget.

Eradication of illiteracy has been one of the major national concerns of the government of India since independence. The need for a literate population and universal education for all children in the age group of 6–14 was recognised as a crucial input for nation building and was given due consideration in the Constitution as well as in the successive five year plans. Some of the important programmes have included:

- (i) **Social Education:** The main elements were literacy, extension, general education, leadership training and social consciousness. The programme was implemented in the First Five-Year Plan (1951–56).
- (ii) **Gram Shikshan Mohim:** Movement for literacy in rural areas was started in 1959 in Satara district of Maharashtra, and was later extended to other parts of the state. The programme aimed at imparting basic literacy skills within a period of about four months and, by 1963, it spread to all the districts of the state. The programme, however, suffered from a lack of systematic follow-up and the consequent relapse to illiteracy was massive.
- (iii) **Farmer's Functional Literacy Project:** Started in 1967–68 as an inter-ministerial project for farmers' training and functional literacy, the project aimed at the popularisation of high yielding varieties of seeds through the

process of adult education. The programme was confined to 144 districts of the country where nearly 8,640 classes were organised for about 2.6 lakh adults.

- (iv) **Non-formal Education:** In the beginning of the Fifth Plan, a programme of non-formal education for ages 15–25 was launched. Although the scope, content and objective of the non-formal education was clearly spelt out, its understanding in the field was very limited and the programmes were actually indistinguishable from the conventional literacy programmes.
- (v) **Polyvalent Adult Education Centres:** Workers' Social Education Institutes and Polyvalent Adult Education Centres were reviewed by a group in 1977, which recommended adoption of Polyvalent Education Centres in the adult education programme for workers in urban areas. In pursuance of this decision, Shramik Vidyapeeths were set up in states.

In the years 1964–66, the Government of India appointed an Education Commission to examine the prevailing conditions of education in India and to suggest measures for its improvement. In its report, the Commission recognised the importance of providing stimulating conditions of work and equate opportunities for professional advancement in educational institutions.¹ Favourable conditions do support the creative work like teaching and research, as well as help retain the quality teachers in the system. The benchmark of the conditions for educational institutions is to enable teachers to function at their highest level of efficiency.² The Commission's report, among other things, stressed the need of appointing women teachers at all levels, creating opportunities for part-time employment of women teachers, residential accommodation for women teachers, particularly in rural areas, introduction of condensed courses for women, promotion of private study for women through corresponding method and special allowances for women teachers. In the light of the Education Commission's Report, the Government set up the Functional Literacy for Adult Women (FLAW) in the years 1975–76. The aim of the FLAW scheme was to enable illiterate adult women to acquire functional skills along with literacy, to promote better awareness of health, hygiene, child-care practices and to bring about attitudinal changes. The target age group in the scheme was 15–45, with greater attention to those in the age group between 15–35. It was gradually expanded along with the expansion of ICDC up to the year 1981–82 but soon the Planning Commission decided to stop the expansion of the FLAW scheme in ICDC project areas mainly due to a constraint of resources.

Five Year Plans and Mission of Literacy

Until the end of the 1970s, overriding priority was given to primary education, based on the assumption that the expansion of primary education would automatically take care of problems of illiteracy. It was only in 1977–78 that the government decided to accord due

¹ *Education Commission 1964–66* (New Delhi), 108.

² *Ibid.*

weightage to adult education along with the programme of Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) and the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) was launched on 2 October 1978. For the first time Adult Education was put on the educational agenda of the nation and thereby made central to the development approach that was pursued. However, the NAEP was not very successful because it was traditional, honorarium-based, hierarchical and government-funded and controlled. Furthermore, the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980–1985) emphasised minimum essential education to all adults, irrespective of their age, sex and residence.

This was to be achieved by flexibility, inter-sectoral cooperation and inter-agency coordination³. These efforts were to be supported by post-literacy, continuing education through a network of rural libraries, as well as instructional programmes conducted through mass communication media. Non-Formal Education for adults particularly in the productive age group of 15–35 was to receive priority in the sixth plan, in view of its potential for immediate impact in raising the level of productivity in the economy. In addition, the programme was designed to give priority to many weaker sections like women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and agriculturer labourers, as well as slum dwellers.

During the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985–1990) and Eighth Five Year Plan (1992–1997), emphasis on eradicating illiteracy and development of national adult education programmes continued. In the Seventh Plan, the Planning Commission's objective was to address the needs of 90 million people, ages 15–35, in the Adult Education Programme. The network of libraries was to play a role in the development of literature for neo literates. Library systems were to be strengthened with specific attention given to improvement of facilities at the national-level institutions. The strategy to achieve the goal was through a mass movement involving social institutions, voluntary organisations, students, teachers, employers and the community.⁴ Likewise, in the Eighth Five Year Plan universalisation of elementary education, eradication of illiteracy in the age group of 15–35, and strengthening of vocational education in relation to emerging needs in rural and urban settings were the major thrusts of the plan. These goals were to be achieved by using formal, non-formal and open channels of learning. Book promotion in various forms was also emphasised in this plan.

In the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997–2002), the emphasis was on restoring the lost momentum of the adult education programme and making it more effective by clarifying the administrative and financing roles of the Centre, the States, Zila Saksharata Samiti (ZSS), Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), other local bodies and non-government organisations (NGOs). Other steps included increasing the range and depth of NGOs' involvement in literacy campaigns; meeting the special needs of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SCs/STs) and reducing rural-urban and male-female disparities in literacy through the campaign mode. In this plan period the National Literacy Mission (NLM) programme was revamped in 1999. In the

³ V.P. Matheswaran and R. Daphne, "Policies Governing Adult and Continuing Education in Five Year Plans: An Overview," *Indian Journal of Adult Education, Special Issue*, April-June 2011 (New Delhi): 99–105.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

coming years, the National Literacy Mission became an important agency for eradicating illiteracy in India.⁵ After the launch of NLM in 1988, between 1988 and 1990, the Mission tried to consolidate the earlier centre-based programme to make its implementation more effective through the campaign-based approach. Provision was also made for the devolution of power from the National Literacy Mission Authority (NLMA) to the State Literacy Mission Authority (SLMA) for financial sanction to projects under the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) and Post Literacy Campaign (PLC) and empowerment of PRIs and urban/local bodies to achieve universal literacy.

The goal of the National Literacy Mission was to attain full literacy, at a sustainable threshold level of 75%, by 2005. The mission sought to achieve this goal by imparting functional literacy to non-literates in the age group of 15–35. This age group has been the focus of attention because they are in the productive and reproductive period of life. The total literacy campaign offers them a second chance, in case they missed the opportunity or were denied access to mainstream formal education. The mission also takes into its fold children in the age group of 9–14 in areas not covered by non-formal education programmes, in order to reach the benefits of literacy to out-of-school children as well. The major thrust of these programmes is not the promotion of literacy among women, scheduled castes and tribes and backward classes.⁶ Besides, the National Literacy Mission eventually aims at ensuring that the total literacy campaigns and their sequels, the post literacy campaigns, successfully move on to continuing education, which provides life-long learning and is responsible for the creation of a learning society. The National Literacy Mission scheduled the following strategy to achieve the set goals:

- (i) Adopting a national strategy in mission mode to assess the need of diversity of approach and inter-regional variations.
- (ii) Stress on proper environment building and active participation of the people, especially women.
- (iii) In course joint efforts by Government and Non-Governmental organisations.
- (iv) Preparation of local specific primers in local languages.
- (v) Integrated approach to total literacy and post literacy programmes to tackle the problem of residual illiteracy and to reduce the time gap between TLC and PLC.
- (vi) Stress on vocational training of neo-literates to facilitate linking literacy with life skills.⁷

As a result of different literacy schemes/programmes run by various governmental and non-governmental agencies, the rate of literacy had increased in the country from 18.55% in 1951 to 65.38% in 2001. In the last five decades, the percentage of literacy has grown to 47.05% or by an average of 9.41 percent. The National Literacy Mission had covered 96.64 million persons under various adult literacy schemes up to December 2001. Out of 593 districts

⁵ Ibid., 99.

⁶ As estimated by UNESCO Institute for Statistics, July 2002 (Montreal: Canada) on <http://www.education@accu.or.jp> (accessed 01.06.2016).

⁷ Ibid.

in the country, 160 districts were covered under Total Literacy Campaign, 264 under Post Literacy Campaign, including 30 under the Rural Functional Literacy Programme and 152 under the Continuing Education Programme. The NLM was engaged at the time in the task of imparting functional literacy to persons in the age group of 15–35 and had set a medium term goal to achieve a sustainable threshold literacy level of 75 percent by 2005.

Because India was lagging behind in the sphere of literacy rate, the Tenth Five Year Plan (2002–2007) and Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007–2012) set their targets to get the desired results through various agencies. In the field of education, the National Literacy Mission was in place with clear focus and medium term goals. In the Tenth Plan period the target of adult education included: (i) To achieve full literacy at a sustainable threshold of 75% by 2005; (ii) To cover all remaining districts by 2003–2004; (iii) To remove residual illiteracy in the existing districts by 2004–2005; (iv) To complete Post Literacy Campaign in all districts, and (v) To launch Continuing Education Programmes in 100 districts by the end of the Plan period.⁸ In fact, illiteracy is largely a problem of social groups among whom literacy rates are low and who also suffer from other handicaps which make it difficult for them to participate in the adult education programme. It is, therefore, most important to ensure greater participation of these groups in future adult education programmes. This requires a focused attention to their needs and problems and to the adoption of specific measures to suit their requirements. The focus in the Tenth Plan was to shift to residual illiteracy and cater to difficult segments of the population. This means that all the remaining districts and the remaining harder-to-reach groups were to be targeted specifically. In these circumstances, a firm view needs to be taken on the content and the reach of the Adult Literacy Programme. The schemes of continuing education and vocational training must enable them to earn a living after they have achieved literacy.

The Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007–2012) witnessed the outlay for Adult Education, fixed at 1.5 billion dollars, which was a very significant enhancement over the combined outlays of 715 million dollars for the 8th, 9th and 10th Plan periods. The 11th Five Year Plan incorporated the notion of lifelong education. This inclusion has facilitated a very significant reassessment of the programme: from the earlier sequential fragmented approach of basic literacy. The National Literacy Mission is developing a series of instruments/models to facilitate this process. However, there are still areas in the country that are educationally deprived and isolated, where volunteers may not be available within the village for teaching because the overall levels of education within that village or area may be very low. These areas would be provided specially trained instructors from outside the community. The instructors will be specially chosen for their sensitivity to issues of gender and caste equality and their commitment to constitutional values of democracy and secularism. In India, a second chance would be provided to young adults and adolescents who lost the opportunity for formal schooling. It has been observed that wherever positive stimulation has been provided,

⁸ Matheswaran and Daphne, "Policies Governing Adult and Continuing Education in Five Year Plans: An Overview," 103.

adolescents have, undoubtedly, made us proud. The new approach in the Eleventh Plan period ensured:

- (i) That literacy is combined with skills for the enhancement of livelihood security and purchasing power provided for rural people under India's new legislation, the Nation Rural Employment Guarantee Act;
- (ii) That literacy is synergised with the determinants of good health, namely, nutrition, sanitation, hygiene and safe drinking water under the National Rural Health Mission;
- (iii) That literacy is incorporated with political empowerment, particularly of women elected to local self-governments;
- (iv) That literacy reinforces and augments India's nation-wide campaign for Right to Information and that process leads to an informed citizenry, crucial to any democracy, and
- (v) That literacy is intrinsically linked to the universalisation of elementary education of equitable quality, so that the fresh flow of literacy is arrested.⁹

Much earlier to the present data the Government of India realised that the pace of improvement was not at the desired level and set up the National Literacy Mission in 1978 to boost literacy among females and in backward areas. The Mission launched the literacy programme in all parts of the country during the 1980s. Hence the results of census year 1991 showed efforts of the Mission in terms of improvement to marginal extent. The gender gap in literacy was narrowed down in 1971; it increased in 1981, then narrowed down to 24.84 points in 1991, 21.59 points in 2001, and 16.68 points in 2011. The decadal difference in female literacy was constantly increasing up to 2001, followed by a slight decline in 2011. In 2011 the overall literacy rate in India is 74.04%, consisting of female and male literacy rate of 65.46% and 82.14%, respectively, Kerala being the highest literate state and Bihar the lowest. It is worth noting that the increase in female literacy rate has been higher than in male literacy rate, narrowing the gender gap particularly during the 1981 and 1991 census, which can be explained through the expansion of education, mostly due to the policies in favour of girls' education by implementation of programmes like District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), National Literacy Mission, Adult Literacy Programme and others.

Concluding Remarks

In the decades since the independence in 1947, the proportion of literates among various age-groups of the population, with rural-urban and male-female classification, serve as key indicators of the socio-economic progress of the country.

The survey estimates indicate that in 2007–08, less than two-thirds (64.5%) of the population of all ages were literate. The overall disparity in literacy across the population is heightened by the presence of both rural-urban and male-female disparity. However, the survey results over the years also reveal the diminishing of disparities across the segments. The

⁹ Ibid., 105.

literacy rate for all ages among rural female, rural male, urban female and urban male populations was found to be 51%, 68.4%, 71.6% and 82.2%, respectively. The corresponding rates two decades ago as estimated in NSS 42nd round (1986–87) were 24.8%, 47.6%, 59.1% and 74.0% respectively. Thus, there has been a quantum leap in the female literacy rates over the last two decades, with the rural female rate having more than doubled, although nearly half the female population of rural India still remains illiterate.

As per census, the adult literacy rate in India was 48.2% in 1991 which increased to 61.0% in 2001. The NSS estimates indicate that 66% of the country's adult population was literate in 2007–08. Among rural females, rural males, urban females and urban males, the adult literacy rates were 47.5%, 71.8%, 74.6% and 88.7%, respectively. Comparison with past NSS rounds indicates that both the rural-urban and the male-female disparities have reduced over time but nevertheless remain significant.

According to the United Nations, basic literacy is the ability to read 40 words per minute, write 20 words per minute, and do 2-digit arithmetic. India has over 35% of world's total illiterate population. India has also the largest number of illiterate people in the world. India faces major challenges, in terms of both the high number of illiterates and widespread disparities that exist between urban and rural areas. These pose as hindrances to national efforts to achieve education for all and eradicate poverty. About 80 percent of the population lives in villages which have the largest concentration of illiterate people.¹⁰ These areas have also maximum gender differentials. Some areas have specific differentials in attaining literacy rates, girls by and large suffered in their educational pursuits mainly due to ignorance on the parts of parents, poverty, geographical hazardous zones like North Eastern States of India and other hilly areas.

The low literacy rate of women in India since independence has remained a matter of concern for all Indian governments. The development of any nation or region is indicated by the level of education of both genders. That is why education for all is strongly recommended and focused on by our government. Although with all efforts in the sector, literacy rate grew to 74.4% in 2011 from a meagre 12% in 1947, the progress in this sphere is very slow. It has been estimated that at the current rate of progress, India will attain universal literacy only until 2060. In the census of 2011 there has been a substantial increase in the number of literate women and although this gap is narrowing, it still persists. Females constitute about 50% of the country's human resource but lack of education snatches their chance to be a part of the progress and development of India. This means our pace of progress is less than the required pace. Even if females do not use education to work, total illiteracy has a huge negative impact on our society.

Low female literacy rate means an overall sluggish growth of India, as it impacts every arena of the development. India is struggling hard to stabilise its growing population through family planning programmes. But if females are illiterate, then this has a direct and negative impact on these initiatives. When a girl or a woman is not educated, it is not only she who

¹⁰ *Vision*, 8th March 2014, in <http://www.drishitiias.com/upsc-current-affairs.php> (accessed 01.06.2016).

suffers, but the entire family has to bear the consequences of her illiteracy. It has been found that illiterate women face more hardships in life than literate ones. They suffer from malnutrition and all other related health problems. A survey showed that that infant mortality is inversely related to mother's educational level. In such a scenario not only women but their children also go through the same conditions.¹¹ A woman who does not know the importance of education in life, does not emphasise the same for her children. This hampers the family as well as the nation's progress as a whole. Lack of education means lack of awareness. Illiterate women are not aware of their rights. They know nothing about initiatives taken by the government for their welfare. Illiterate women keep on struggling and bear the harshness of life, family and even their husbands. The negative attitude of parents towards the girl child and her education is one of the major reasons for the low female literacy rate in India.

In these circumstances, the Government of India has taken several measures to improve the literacy rate in villages and towns of India. State Governments have been instructed to ensure and improve the literacy rate in districts and villages where people are very poor. Several states in India have executed successful programmes to boost literacy rates. Over time, a set of factors have emerged as being key to success: official will to succeed, deliberate steps to engage the community in administering the programme, adequate funding for infrastructure and teachers and provisioning additional services which are considered valuable by the community. 8 September of every year is known as International Literacy Day. India has put its Literacy Mission high on its agenda with the government initiating a number of measures including adopting the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education, in order to achieve higher literacy rate in the country. The measures also include recasting the National Literacy Mission to focus on literacy of women, reduction in the dropout rate of children at school levels and introducing the Public – Private Participation (PPP) in the school education. The Human Resource Development (HRD) Ministry has set a target of achieving 80% literacy for women by the end of the 11th Five Year Plan¹². In addition, the Free and Compulsory Education for Children Bill, 2009, provides that every child in the age group of six to fourteen shall have the right to free and compulsory education in a neighbourhood school until completion of elementary education. This measure will lead to significant reform in the elementary education system besides ensuring universalisation of elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality.

Even for the current Five Year Plan (2012–2017) the Planning Commission has constituted a working group on Elementary Education and Literacy, under the Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Human Resource Development. In terms of reference, the working group will review the existing programmes under Elementary Education and Literacy in spheres of access, enrolment, retention, dropouts and with particular emphasis on the outcomes of quality of education by gender, social and regional classifications.¹³ The

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "India and Its Literacy Mission," Ministry of Human Resource Development, in *Fortnightly News Bulletin*, 1–15 September 2009 (New Delhi: Apeejay Stya Education Research Foundation, 2009), 22–23.

¹³ For details see *Planning Commission's Order*, dated 8th April 2011 (New Delhi), 6.

group was entrusted to suggest improvements in the delivery mechanism for effective implementation of various schemes/programmes in the light of Right to Education (RTE) Act, passed earlier. It would also undertake an in-depth review of the implementation of MDMS, in terms of adequacy and effectiveness of the delivery systems and infrastructure and the impact of programmes on school attendance and on improvement in the nutritional status of children.¹⁴ Among other things the terms of reference included that the working group would suggest measures for faster reduction in illiteracy in the country with emphasis on gender, regional and social dimensions and also incentivising states with higher literacy rates to achieve 100% literacy during the 12th plan period.

Today, India is considered one of the emerging economic super powers in the changing global scenario. But its achievements in human development indicators are still lagging behind those countries with which the country's economic growth is competing – for instance China. Also, India's position in human development ranking is falling behind some of the countries whose economic growth is relatively poorer – for instance Bangladesh. Besides, within the country there are huge variations with respect to economic and human development indicators across states and across regions\districts within the states. In fact, literacy and basic education are crucial for the human as well as the economic development. India is one of the developing countries that have a historical trend of low levels of literacy rates, in spite of India's remarkable performance in terms of child schooling, especially since the 1990s, its performance in literacy rate being relatively poor. It is because of the large stocks of illiterate population in the country, particularly in the adult and older age groups who are ignored, so far, by the policy measures. UNESCO's recent Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report 2012 indicates that out of the total of 775 million adult illiterates on the globe in 2010, 37% of them are located in India; China's share is only 7%. Therefore, the policy concern is about the prospect of literacy and the policy intervention required for accelerating the progress in literacy rate in general and adult literacy rate in particular, in India.

Thus, India's prospect in meeting the Education for All (EFA) goal with respect to improving literacy rates in the country would require policy attention and better initiative. Achieving the goal of 100% literacy rate in the country depends on its policy intervention through adult literacy programmes, rigour in their implementation and their coverage. It is important because, unless India improves its literacy levels remarkably, it will remain one of those poor performing countries at the global level in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI).

¹⁴ Ibid.