

## ILLITERACY & INDIA

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### INTRODUCTION

Illiteracy in our country is by far the most serious problem. We all recognize that illiteracy is bad and that it prevents the cultural growth of a people. But illiteracy in our country continues to exist on an appalling scale. Even today among ten in India about four are illiterate. Nor is there any organized effort to do away with this deplorable state of backlog. We tinker at the problem instead of tackling it thoroughly. We made experiments. The States have ambitious programmes of setting up primary schools in every village, but these are yet in the cold shade of neglect.

But illiteracy can be removed, if concerted efforts are made both by private organizations and the states. Within a decade, the Russians got rid of ignorance as colossal as ours; and now the Chinese have also achieved it. They took a total war against illiteracy for which the services of all educated men and women were conscripted.

For this, education must be made free and compulsory at least upto the age of fourteen. That is the plain directive of our Constitution. Recently a bill was adopted in the Parliament of India to make primary education a fundamental right. But even where education is free in India, it is not compulsory; and it is free only at the lower primary stage here and there. The result is that most of those who give up learning after this stage, are the drop-outs, lapse back, into ignorance. Of course, making elementary education compulsory demands money. Children of workers and peasants have to think of earning before they can think of learning.

Mahatma Gandhi recognized this basic difficulty and he suggested a scheme by which children would begin to earn while they were learning. In that scheme, known as basic Education scheme, it is not only craft-centered, but the crafts are so chosen as to have a profit basis. The scheme however did not make much headway in free India. The function of education should be to direct the child's creative instincts properly. This has been ignored in the basis pattern advocated by Gandhiji.

The problem can be solved only by recognition of the fact that education must be the primary responsibility of the State. It must be given a high priority. Voluntary efforts can only touch a fringe of the problem. However, in a District of Kerala recently hundred percent literacy was achieved through combined efforts of the public and the government.

A scheme of having a network of primary schools has been drawn up. Provisions for financing the scheme have also been made. If implemented, it will mean the first step towards a nation-wide programme of fight against the curse of illiteracy.

The problem of illiteracy in India will not be solved only by providing education for the children. Illiteracy is rampant among the older generation of people, particularly in the rural areas: and not a

little of our social and culture backwardness is due to this. Campaign among the illiterate adults, therefore, is also a crying necessity. Adult education has so long been only a piecemeal, voluntary affair. However, it has now found a place in the different schemes and projects of the Government. But much ground has not yet been covered to step up primary education. The segment has to be given top priority.

## **HOW ECONOMIC PROBLEMS IN INDIAN EXACERBATE POVERTY OR THE CASE FOR RENEWED LITERACY PROGRAMS IN INDIA**

The *chicken and the egg* problem. There is no better way to describe the debilitating relationship between poverty and unemployment in India. Unless you're graphing the correlation between both of these concepts, establishing a framework that makes working to solve these problems both important and impossible at the same time.

Poverty at its core is a life crippling condition. But literacy, is not. Circa 1881, the illiterate *zamindar* (who can't read, but for some reason still keeps stellar and mildly oppressive books of accounts) and an illiterate farmer. In this situation, the acquisition of money makes for a better wager than the acquisition of literacy, ergo education.

Fast forward to 2012, and the situation is well, reversed. Let me make the case for literacy in the information age. While the current rate of computer literacy in India is acceptable of we still treat ourselves as a third-world country, what many an NGO has found that it is not the technology that is a problem, but the fact that people can't read.

Providing computers and the pre-requisite electricity to run them is entirely possible. In a village, if you're at a high school level reading in Indian standard terms, you could learn pretty much anything you want. With computers and the fact that you can download the entirety of Wikipedia to a USB thumb drive the size of your, well, thumb means that literacy – both reading and writing comprehension makes illiteracy in India's adults the biggest impediment to their upward mobility.

## **THE EFFECTS OF ILLITERACY IN INDIA**

Its a good thing that I didn't start off writing a checklist for the ways in which illiteracy effects the nation as well as the individual because we'd run out of screen space or patience, and I'm not sure whether it would be in that order.

The biggest effect of illiteracy in India is poverty. Poverty also happens to be the single biggest cause of illiteracy in India and a precursor to all other effects. The inability to attain basic nutritious and potable water are the more popularly quoted effects of poverty in India, but the king of the hill when it comes to effects that can fracture an individual remains illiteracy. After all, it is one of those things that actually lets people pick themselves up and out of poverty, even if they have to do it by the way of their bootstraps.

The thing about illiteracy in India and its effects is that they all compound together to form a burden that is passed on from generation to generation and if history is any indication, it is one that has been increasing with each generational shift and with each year added to the calendar.

## **GROWTH & LITERACY**

India covers an area of 3,287,263 sq. km from the Himalayas to the tropical rain forests of the south. The country is divided into 28 states and 7 union territories (UTs) for the purpose of governance. States and the centre function under a federal relationship. Union territories are under the direct control of the Central Government. Education has been on the Concurrent List of the Constitution of India since 1976. As per the national census, 2001, total population of India is 1027.02 million, out of which 495.74 million are females. As the second most populous country, India is home to 16 per cent of world's population. In terms of Human Development Index (HDI), India occupies 127th position in the family of 177 nations (Human Development Report 2004).

The paper makes a modest attempt at mapping out literacy in India, focusing on an analysis of the illiterates by making use of data from the Census of India, the National Family Health Survey-2, and various rounds of the National Sample Survey. The primary objective of the paper is to locate the illiterates at the sub-national and district levels, and to highlight the characteristics of the illiterates, given the limitations of the available information.

The National Adult Education Programme (NAEP), the first countrywide programme in 1978, viewed literacy as a means to bring about fundamental changes in socio-economic development. It aimed at covering 100 million illiterate persons in the age group 15-35 in the adult education centres across the country. Based on the findings of the evaluation of the NAEP, the National Policy on Education (1986) suggested creation of a National Literacy Mission (NLM) to design and manage large-scale literacy programmes.

Adopting a well-defined campaign approach, the NLM launched the total literacy campaigns in 1990. The objective was to impart functional literacy (i.e. self-reliance in 3 Rs) to non-literates in the age group 15-35. The total literacy campaigns also created positive environment for implementing national and state level basic education programmes. The initial literacy campaign was followed up with post-literacy and continuing education programmes aimed at preventing relapse into illiteracy, to enroll dropouts and enable non-achievers to upgrade their literacy skills. Besides various adult literacy programmes, the literacy rate of population in 7-14 age group has been directly influenced by the implementation of a number of basic education development programmes in the 1990s, thereby directly contributing to the overall literacy status of population in 7+ age group.

In most of the developing countries, including India, literacy has been measured by the 'literacy rate', which is the percent (or, equivalently, fraction) of the population, usually adult population. In India, the decennial census data remain the most widely acceptable and frequently quoted estimates of literacy. Besides, the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) conducts sample surveys once in every five years, usually in between two census years, to collect data on literacy status and other socio-economic characteristics of the population. The estimates of literacy by the NSSO can be viewed as the mid-term assessment of literacy in the country.

However, the definition and method of assessment of 'literacy' varies across various sources such as the Census of India, NLM, NSSO and NFHS. The definition of 'literacy' in the population census of India is fairly liberal. In the census enumeration, 'a person, who can read and write with understanding in any language, is treated as literate.

### **WHY SHOULD ONE BE CONCERNED ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF ILLITERACY IN INDIA**

The one thing that is clear from the graph above is that enough isn't being pushed for the speedy eradication of illiteracy in India. If someone asked you to pick one single metric as a staple barometer of a nation's potential and prospect, it would be literacy. More so for a nation like ours that will have more than 40% of our population in the sub-35 age group in 2015.

While the current stance of letting bygones be bygones that the government has adopted as the de-facto response to flanging adult literacy programs in India, has been disappointing, it is the state of the upward growth of child illiteracy in India that is the most alarming of the lot! If I had to pick one single statistic to get the unconcerned citizen initiated, then this would be it.

While the plight of the street children in India might not be something that piques your interest beyond the occasional pang of privileged guilt, it really should. After all, the money to support the increasing population of the uneducated is going to come out of your pocket whether you like it or not – taxes. Taxes whether to feed them and clothe them or to keep them from feeding into the veins of the criminal underbelly of your city, the cost of ignoring the problem will eventually come to haunt us all, rich or poor.

### **MAKING THE REMOVAL OF ILLITERACY IN INDIA A NATIONAL PRIORITY**

As far as poverty eradication programmes go, the government has been working on trying to get ahead of this problem since the British sun set on our country. However, there is still need to impress upon the populace that education is the very string that is holding India back and it is, for the purpose of a generalized discussion, what the web of socio-economic issues in India is made out of.

The government as well as various NGOs have been working on solving the seemingly insurmountable problem of how we can eradicate illiteracy in India for both children and adults.

Everything from basic financial literacy programs to using computers to help adults learn how to read in less than 24 hours is on the table. While too many cooks may spoil the broth, this particular problem is so complex and multi-headed that we need more, not fewer solutions.

## **CONCLUSION**

The last two decades have shown enormous improvement in the literacy scene in the country as reflected by the average literacy figures. Yet, the country has more than 300 million illiterates (7+ age group). Where are they and who are they? Though illiteracy still remains to be wiped out in every state, the burden in terms of numbers seems to be carried by a few states, namely, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Not surprisingly, analysis shows that the gender disparity is also higher in these states. A positive feature is that some of these states like Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh have recorded very substantial increase in female literacy between 1991 and 2001 indicating the possibility of reducing gender disparity fairly quickly, if the trend continues.

Though most of the so-called educationally backward states have contributed positively towards the decline in the number of illiterates in the country, Bihar remains a classic case of under development, where slow progress in literacy and high growth of population have made a huge addition to the pool of illiterates in the country.

It is important to note that educational development is not uniformly poor in all these states. For instance, Maharashtra is among the leading states in overall status of primary education as well as literacy. This points to the existence of intra-state disparities that are as important as inter-state disparities. In this context it is significant to note that in 20% districts, the average literacy rate is below 50%. When female literacy is considered, more than 40% districts are found to show less than 50% literacy rate. Around 65% of illiterates are found concentrated in 7 states, and 67 districts across 9 major states have million plus illiterates which together account for around 30% of the illiterates in 2001.

In other words, it is these states and districts, which need special efforts for reducing illiteracy, whether through direct adult literacy programmes or through intensified programmes of primary education. Examining the changing age profile of literates reveals that the literacy rate has increased steadily since 1961, in all age groups. In fact, the trajectory of change clearly indicates that the increase has come essentially due to increased primary school participation. Further, what is alarming is that an estimated 22.65 million children in the age group 15-19 were illiterates.

Youth illiteracy (age group 15-29) appeared to be quite high with an estimated number of around 79 million illiterates. Analysis of the NSS, 55<sup>th</sup> round data shows that the literacy rates of socio-economically disadvantaged groups such as the Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes continue to be very low, particularly in the educationally backward states in the Hindi heartland and Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. More revealing is the fact that the illiteracy rates of casual and agricultural labourers are relatively very high in these states.

Who are illiterates is a difficult proposition to examine, as many factors including their location in different states matter significantly. Illiterates are found across all demographic, socio-economic and age groups, showing that inefficiency in primary education continue to be a major factor for continuation of illiteracy. Illiterates are relatively more in rural areas because of obvious reasons and females are substantially higher with a differential of 24% found in 2001. An overarching observation is that irrespective of location, gender and religion, poverty continues to be the most important determining factor.

Taking concentration of agricultural labourers as a proxy for poverty levels, it was found that presence of illiterates and agricultural labourers particularly among female population goes hand in hand in most of the states. As per NSS, 55<sup>th</sup> round, the illiteracy level and the Monthly Per Capita Consumer Expenditure (MPCE) and the illiteracy rate are inversely related to each other, both in rural and urban areas, thereby further supporting our argument that poverty is one of the critical factors determining literacy level of households in India.

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