

STATUS OF LITERACY IN MODERN INDIA

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Abstract

In a country like India literacy is a key for socio-economic progress. It is defined as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. The earliest system of gurukul declined gradually and in British India a large number of English primary schools grew and correspondingly the literacy rate in India rose from 3.2 per cent in 1881 to 12.2 per cent in 1947. In independent India the provision of universal and compulsory education for all children in the age group of 6-14 was cherished as a priority in the Directive Policy in Article 45 of the Constitution. In a major breakthrough the Parliament passed 86th Amendment Act, 2002 to make elementary education a Fundamental Right for children. In order to provide more funds for education an education cess of 2 percent was imposed on all direct and indirect central taxes through the Finance Act, 2004. Despite government programmes and efforts slow increase in literacy rate and wider gender disparity in the literacy rate continued to be an unhealthy sign for literacy prospect in the country.

Key words : Literacy, Meaning and Rate, Census 2011, Skill .

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Modern Meaning of Literacy

Originally derived from the Latin word "Letter" literacy is the ability to read and write in at least one language. Literacy is a human right, a tool of personal empowerment and a means for social and human development. The notion of basic literacy is used for the initial learning of reading and writing which adults who have never been to school need to go through. In the context the term functional literacy is kept for the level of reading and writing which adults are thought to need in modern complex society. Use of the term underlines the idea that although people may have basic levels of literacy, they need a different level to operate in their day-to-day lives

(Barton, 2006). In a clearer term it may be said that to acquire literacy is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. It is to dominate those techniques in terms of consciousness; to understand what one reads and to write what one understands. It is to communicate graphically. Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words or syllables-lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe- but rather an attitude of creation and recreation, a self-transformation, producing a stance of intervention in one's context (Freire, 1974). It is at the heart of basic education for all, and essential for eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy.

Several international agencies including the International Council for Adult Education, notes literacy as learning to read and write, reading and writing to learn and developing these skills and using them effectively for meeting basic needs (UNESCO, 2003). Universal access to quality education in developed countries has helped to shape this concept of literacy. According to it true literacy encompasses much more than just basic skills. It includes the ability to analyse things, understand general ideas or terms, use symbols in complex ways, apply theories and perform other necessary life skills, including the ability to engage in the social and economic life of the community. This broader concept of literacy is also called functional literacy and opposite to it is the basic literacy concept which focuses on acquiring skills, functional literacy deals with how people actually use such skill to live and work in society. Recent research in fields such as sociology, the cognitive sciences, linguistics, anthropology and education have contributed to an

even broader, more inclusive view of literacy, called plural literacy. According to the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 'A plural view of literacy recognises that there are many literacy practices that are embedded in social, political and cultural processes, personal circumstances and socio-economic structures (*UNESCO:2-3*). This view of literacy sees it as an evolving set of skills, with less of an emphasis on a fixed set of generic skills, as in basic literacy, or measurable technical and life skills, as in functional literacy.

Similarly, in addition, there are studies of multiple literacy that focus on encouraging students to take meaning from, and to understand how, literacy can help them in different social contexts. However, both these views-plural and multiple are important because they highlight the many different ways we use language in our homes, workplaces, schools, communities and social groups. What we use literacy to do varies in different settings. But the way of defining literacy affects how problems are identified and what is done to solve the problem. For instance, government literacy policies intended to create employment and develop work-related skills reflect a functional view of literacy (*Campbell, 2007:5-6*). A plural or multiple literacy approach seeks to achieve more communal results. The exclusive use of functional literacy policies would have little impact on multiple or plural literacy objectives-such as better health outcomes, expanded adult learning and more civic engagement. Therefore, the creation of literacy policies needs to address functional and plural/multiple literacies.

In the circumstances we need a radical redefinition of literacy, one that includes a recognition of the vital importance that morality plays in shaping literacy. We need a radical redefinition of what it means for society to have all the appearances of literacy and yet to abandon the book as its dominant metaphor. We must understand what happens when the computer replaces the book as the prime metaphor for visualising the self... It is to remember that those who celebrate the intensities and discontinuities of postmodern electronic culture in print write from an advanced literacy. That literacy provides them the profound power of choosing their ideational repertoire. No such choice or power is available to the illiterate young person subjected to an endless stream of electronic images. In general on the basis of definitions, literacy has got four levels; (i) Below Basic Literacy- It indicates no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills; (ii) Basic Literacy- It indicates skills necessary to perform simple

and everyday literacy activities; (iii) Intermediate Literacy- It indicates skills necessary to perform moderately challenging literacy activities and (iv) Proficient Literacy- It indicates skills necessary to perform more complex and challenging literacy activities.

Literacy and Globalisation

In today's world literacy is about more than just words and meaning. It is important because the world is rapidly changing. The effects of globalisation and free trade, better communication and information technologies and the rise of societies that use knowledge and information to create wealth, have resulted in a growing demand for highly skilled workers. This global competition for skilled, literate workers explains why literacy has become so important (*Canadian Council, 2007:86*). It is important because it affects people's lives directly, impacting their chances of employment, level of income, and type of occupation (*OECD, 1997:62*). Research shows that higher literacy skills can lead to better jobs, increased incomes and greater productivity (*Osberg, 2000*). Literacy skills also affect social status, level of political participation, opportunities for cultural expression, health, survival of language, access to social services and opportunity to learn (*Boothby, 2002*). Having good literacy skills enhances a country's quality of life by reducing poverty, lowering unemployment, lessening the need for public assistance and encouraging better parenting (*OECD, 1997:57*).

Thus, the word "literacy", while at first glance seem to be a term that everyone understand, at the same, the concept has proved to be both complex and dynamic, continuing to be interpreted and defined in a multiplicity of ways. People's notions of what it means to be literate or illiterate are influenced by academic research, institutional agendas, national context, cultural values and personal experiences. In the academic community, theories of literacy have evolved from those focused solely on changes in individuals to more complex views encompassing the broader social contexts that encourage and enable literacy activities and practices to occur. As a result of these and other developments, understanding in the international policy community have expanded too: from viewing literacy as a simple process of acquiring basic cognitive skills, to using these skills in ways that contribute to socio-economic development, to developing the capacity for social awareness and critical reflections as a basis for personal and social change.

Besides these international views of literacy, there are a number of regional and national definitions of literacy and most of the countries define literacy as the ability to read and/or write simple statements in either a national or native language.

Literacy in India as defined in census operations, is the ability to read and write with understanding in any language. A person who can merely read but cannot write is not classified as literate. Any formal education or minimum educational standard is not necessary to be considered literate. The Indian Constitution has recognised the significance of education and literacy for social transformation. The Preamble affirms a determination to secure liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship and equality of status and opportunity. Literacy forms the cornerstone for making the provision of equality of opportunity a reality. The objective specified in the Preamble contains the basic structure of the Constitution, which cannot be amended, and the preamble may be invoked to determine the ambit of Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy. There are several articles of the Constitution which provides for its citizens better opportunities relating to education- the key vehicle for literacy. In Fundamental Rights Articles 12, 14, 19, 21, 29 and 30(1) while Articles 39(A), 41, 45, 46, 51A(h) in Directive Principles of State Policy, directly or indirectly ensure the provisions/rights of citizens to get education and literacy. In addition, there have been specific amendments 42nd, 73rd, 74th and 83rd to the Constitution affecting education. These amendments pertain to provisions to enable education being included in the Concurrent List, devolution of powers to the local bodies and making elementary education a Fundamental Right formally.

Similar to UNICEF's definition the Indian government defines literacy as the ability to read and write for a person aged 7 or above. A nation's literacy rate is determined, to a great degree, by the definition of literacy and the method used to measure it. Countries struggling to achieve higher rates often tend to lower definitional bars which then makes progress that much easier. India is no exception. However, even in case of India, the definition of literacy as given by our policy makers needs a revision. *The Hindu* wrote, 'Without addition of any values and qualification for employment, mere ability to read and write is not sufficient. We need to channelise more funds on educational sector to improve the quality of education imparted to Indians, not only in terms of technology and employ ability but also moral values which would

make them a responsible citizen of India (*The Hindu*, 4th April 2011). Education is not all about knowledge of alphabets, it is much more than that. Education, in its true sense, is when people understand the meaning of development and become aware about the important issues. When they become able to grow themselves and can contribute in nation's growth. This requires information and potential to understand the repercussion of events, which come by proper basic education. 'Recently the increment in literacy rate is really good for a developing country. But apparently the definition of being literate in India would not suffice to meet the educational status'. India's literacy rate has increased six times since the end of the British rule from 12% to 74% in 2011 but still India has the world's largest population of illiterates and at the current rate of progress it will take until 2060 for India to achieve universal literacy.

Prospects in India

In India the last census was conducted in the year 2011 and among other things, it showed a positive development in female literacy. More number of females have become literate compared to males in the decade 2001-2011. The largest increase in literacy rate was noticed in Dadra Nagar Haveli by 18.6 points- significant growth from 57.6 per cent in 2001 to 76.2 per cent in 2011 and Bihar by 14.8 points- from 47.0 per cent in last census in 2001 to 61.8 percent in 2011. 'The gap between the literacy rate in urban and rural areas is steady declining in every census. In census 2011, the gap stands at 16.3 points. As per latest statistics, the literacy rate among urban population is 84.1 percent while it is 67.8 for rural population (*The New Indian Express*, 1st May 2013). Analysing the census data since 1961, the report suggested that the three-fourth of the population of age 7 years and above is literate in the country. Four out of five males and two out of three females in the country are literate. The total population of literate females in the country was 224.2 million and in the past one decade it increased to 328 million showing a significant addition of 104.6 million literate females in the country. According to the census the total number of children is 164.5 millions about 660.000 more than the number recorded in 2001. The child sex ratio is an indicator of the further trends of sex ratio. The sex ratio in the age group 0-6 years attempts to bring out the recent changes in society in its attitude and outlook towards the girl child. As a result of free education system in the villages, the literacy rate has gone up

tremendously, especially among females. The following literacy rate in India from 1951 to 2011 is a full indicative of the analysis given above.

Literacy rates in India, 1951-2011

Census Year	Persons	Male	Female	Male-Female % in Literacy
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86	18.3
1961	28.3	40.4	15.35	25.05
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97	23.98
1981	43.57	56.38	29.76	26.62
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29	24.84
2001	65.38	75.85	54.16	21.7
2011	74.4	82.14	65.46	16.68

Source: Census of India

Literacy is an instrument of social change. It empowers individuals and communities, generates an awareness of one's own potentialities and inner strengths equipping people to combat oppression, exclusion and discrimination. Since independence literacy has been given due recognition for social and economic development. It is observed that during 1951-2011, female literacy rate has been increased by 6.3 times whereas in case of male, it is just 2 times. The improvement of the literacy rate among both male and female was quite considerable up to 1961 but this pace could not be maintained during 1961-1971. Still the female literacy rate is 65.46 per cent as against the male literacy rate of 82.14 and we can notice that the per cent of female literacy is 16.68 per cent less than that of male. Thus, in the context it is urgently required to take up a drastic step to bridge the gap between the two by making special arrangement to enhance the education level of female in India.

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