

Essay on Illiteracy – A bane

“India has the highest number of illiterates in the world, a mind-boggling 290 Million adult illiterates—A matter of utter shame. Mahatma Gandhi visualized education as a basic tool for the development of consciousness and reconstruction of society. Great reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ish war Chandra Vidyasagar thought that emancipation of Indians was only possible through education.”

After 57 years of independence, we are still too far away from universal literacy. What is the reason? Why have we come to such a sorry state? Reason can be well enumerated; Improper planning, poor implementation of policies, lack of infrastructure, and lack of political will are the main causes responsible for such state of affairs.

If seen statistically, literacy in India has made remarkable strides since Independence as seen by the recently declared provisional results of the Census 2001. The literacy rate has increased from % in 1951 to % in 2001. This is despite the fact that during the major part of the last five decades there has been an exponential growth of the population nearly 2% per annum. Some of the important highlights of Census 2001 are given below:

The literacy rate in the country has increased to % which reflects an overall increase of %, the fastest ever growth. This is the highest rate since independence.

The male literacy rate has increased to % which shows an increase of %. On the other hand, the female literacy of % has increased at a much faster rate of %.

The male-female literacy gap has reduced from % in 1991 to % in 2001. Mizoram has the smallest gap (%) followed by Kerala (%) and Meghalaya (%).

All States and Union Territories without exception have shown an increase in literacy rates during 1991-2001. In all the States and Union Territories, the male literacy has gone now over 60%.

For the first time since independence, there has been a decline in the absolute number of illiterates. In the previous years, there has been a continuous increase in the number of illiterates, despite the increase in the literacy rates, but now for the first time, the total number of illiterates has come down by million.

The number of literate persons has increased to million in 2001 thus adding an additional million literates in the country.

Rajasthan has recorded the highest increase in the literacy rate among the States/UTs of India. The literacy rate of Rajasthan in the 7+ population in 1991 was % which has increased to 61.3% in 2001. The State also recorded a very good increase in female literacy. It was % in 1991 which has increased to % in 2001. The female literacy rate of Chhattisgarh in the 7+ population in 1991 was % which has increased to % in 2001. Thus the rise in the female literacy rate in Chhattisgarh has been to the extent of % which is the highest among all the States/UTs of the country. Madhya Pradesh also recorded a good increase in the female literacy rate. In 1991 the literacy rate of females was % which has increased to % in 2001.

According to Census 2001, the State of Kerala has topped the list with % literacy. This state also secured top position in both male (%) and female (%) literacy. Kerala closely followed by Mizoram and Lakshadweep. Bihar with a literacy rate of % ranks last in the

country with the lowest rate for males (%) and females (%).

In Ninth Five Year Plan, education is regarded as the most crucial investment in human development. The Prime Minister Special Action Plan has stressed the necessity for expansion and improvement of social infrastructure in the education field. The goal has further gained importance in the National Agenda for Government (NAG) which states; "We are committed to the total eradication of illiteracy. We will formulate and implement plans to gradually increase the governmental and non-governmental expenditure on education up to 6% of the that is to provide education to all. We will implement the Constitutional provision of making primary education free and compulsory up to the 5th standard. Our aim is to move towards equal access to educational standards up to the school-leaving stage. We shall strive to improve the quality of education at all levels—from Primary Schools up to Universities".

Under the Vajpayee Government, the Department of Elementary Education and Literacy, Ministry of Human Resource Development, has launched the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) a national mission to provide quality education for eight years to all children in the age group of 6-14 years. All the districts in the country are to be covered by the program. By 2010, all the children will have completed eight years of quality elementary education under the program. The National Literacy Mission (NLM) launched in 1998. The goal of the National Literacy Mission is to attain full literacy, i.e., a sustainable threshold level of 75 % by 2005. The mission seeks to achieve this goal by imparting functional literacy to non-literates in the 15-35 age group. 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 9-14 age group, in areas not covered by non-formal education programs to reach the benefits of literacy to out-of-school children as well. The major thrust of these programs is on the promotion of literacy among women, Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and backward classes.

The National Literacy Mission eventually aims at ensuring that the total literacy campaigns and their sequel, 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.

Strategy to achieve the set goals :

- (a) To Adopt a national strategy in mission mode to take care of the need for diversity of approach and inter-regional variations.
- (b) Stress on proper environment building and active participation of the people, especially women.
- (c) Encourage joint efforts by Governmental and Non-Governmental organizations.
- (d) Preparation of local specific primers in local languages.
- (e) An integrated approach to total literacy and post-literacy programs to tackle the problem of residual illiteracy and to reduce the time gap between TLC and PLP.
- (f) Stress on vocational training of neo-literates to facilitate linking literacy with life skills.

A number of significant programs have been taken up since

Independence to eradicate illiteracy among adults through different programs like Social Education (1951-56), Gram Shiksha Muhim, Farmers Functional Literacy (1967-68), Non-Formal Education, Polyvalent Adult Education, Education Commission, Functional Literacy for Adult Women, National Adult Education Programme, Rural Functional Literacy Project, State Adult Education Programme, Adult Education through Voluntary Agencies, etc.

Earlier there was also a campaign mode for a two-year duration of 40 hours' instruction, and evaluation was conducted at the end of the campaign.

After the launch of NLM in 1988, between 1988 and 1990, the Mission tried to consolidate the earlier center-based program to make its implementation more effective through the campaign-based approach. The real breakthrough came with an experiment in mass literacy, a campaign initiated in 1989 and successfully completed in Ernakulam District of Kerala.

The basic idea is to see that the neo-literates are not slipped back into illiteracy. There are numerous good schemes but the problem lies in their proper implementation. Lack of motivation among school teachers, poor infrastructure facilities, corruption, are the basic reasons why the result could not come as desired. There is little healthy contact between the teacher and the taught, parents are unwilling to send their daughters to school. The drop-out rate still remains high. Some states, like Tamil Nadu, launched the scheme of Mid-day meals to reduce the drop-out percentage. The infrastructure provided in the schools is not adequate. Many schools are being run in open or in buildings without roof or plaster.

It is absolutely necessary that the problem of illiteracy is to be tackled at a war level by making awareness to the general masses

about the importance of being literate. A powerful mass movement involving the Central and State Governments, Municipalities, Panchayats, NGOs, the media, and every other supportive institution is required to be launched. Education is the most significant instrument of National development. Literacy is the base of the Nation's overall progress and development.

We must remember that ignorance leads to greater expectation and lack of empowerment leads to the perpetuation of poverty and hunger. India is known for the best-skilled manpower in the world, and also for the largest number of illiterates in the world. The bane of illiteracy is to be root out at the earliest at all levels with all-out positive efforts with strong political determination and will. Eradication of illiteracy should be given due priority. Delay can be disastrous.