Literacy and Education

Literacy rates are taken to be one of the key indicators of a country's development. In the pursuit and acquisition of the basic criteria that constitute literacy, however, it is education, that vital ingredient necessary for survival and coping in one's world, that is given the go-by.

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> The real difficulty is that people have no idea of what education truly is. We assess the value of education in the same manner as we assess the value of land or of shares in the stock-exchange market. We want to provide only such education as would enable the student to earn more. We hardly give any thought to the improvement of the character of the educated. The girls, we say, do not have to earn; so why should they be educated? As long as such ideas persist there is no hope of our ever knowing the true value of education.
> (*True Education*, p 38, NCTE website, Gandhi on Education.)

We are informed that since 1990 the global adult literacy rate has risen from 75 per cent to 82 per cent and the number of illiterates has fallen by 100 million (China alone contributing 94 million), yet there are 771 million people who are not literate, with women accounting for 64 per cent of adult illiterates and close to 100 million children are not in school. The school life expectancy from primary to tertiary education in 2002 (world average) was 10.5 years – 9.4 years of primary and secondary education and 1.1 years of tertiary education. A child in sub-Sahara Africa can expect to attend school for an average of five to nine years fewer than western Europe or the Americas. Children in south, west Asia and in the Arab states have much lower educational prospects. Yet, we are also informed that globally share of education in national income (GNP) has increased.[1]

What do these figures actually tell us? At one level they seem to say a lot but at another level the reader is left wondering if she has really learnt anything at all about the global situation with respect to literacy and learning. Official numbers tell us that all is well with education and that the world is making substantial progress – but our eyes and ears tell a different story.

What does literacy really mean?[2] Having the skills to read with comprehension? To sign ones name? To be able to fill forms and write letters? Over the years – especially in south Asia – we have embraced a minimalist notion of literacy. Time bound campaigns teaching people to read generates a great deal of enthusiasm but in the absence of a larger literate environment – the adults who learn the skills quickly lose most of it. We are informed that the experience of Cuba, China and some of the South American countries has been different. Adult literacy programmes were located within the larger effort to ensure universal elementary education – thereby shutting the tap before mopping the floor. The period of the later 1980s and 1990s was exciting and creative – literacy movements in many parts of the world were embedded within people's struggles for equality and justice. The adult literacy movement was inspired by thinkers like John Dewey and Paulo Freire who emphasised broadening of intellect and development of problem solving and critical thinking skills. Literacy was seen as a powerful tool – one that would open the mind to new ideas, enable them to make informed choices and give people the courage to act.

Unfortunately, notwithstanding the insightful contributions of Gandhi, Dewey, Freire and many others like them, the world today continues to take an instrumental or a functional view of literacy. At the heart of the discourse on literacy today are timeless questions related to the goal of education. Is it to enhance the capabilities of people to negotiate an increasingly unequal, divisive and polarised world from a position of strength? Is it to enable people to reflect critically on their life situation and understand the world they live in to make informed choices? Good quality education, in essence, involves creating a system that enables adults and children to learn to know, learn to do, learn to live with others and appreciate interdependence and diversity, and above all learn to "act with ever greater autonomy, judgment and personal responsibility".[3]

An inability to address the fundamental goals of education does not augur well for democracies across the world.[4] In an increasingly polarised world, religion, race, caste and language identities are reinforced. Government schools in most parts of the world no longer provide a common shared space for children of different backgrounds, races and communities. Children today grow up without getting an opportunity to mix with children from other religions and social groups. While children from middle class and affluent families with greater access to the world media may potentially be exposed to different viewpoints, the majority of poor children not only attend school where they mix with their own kind but have little access to the media (print, electronic and visual). This is also the case with adult literacy or continuing education programmes – the poorest across the world can at best access literacy classes. They do not have access to education that could help them deal with the challenges of a globalising world, agrarian distress, loss of traditional occupations and livelihoods and most importantly large-scale migration and displacement. We seem to have lost sight of the real power and

the true value of education and learning in the 21st century.

Let us dwell on the situation in India. At one level India is seen as making tremendous progress and the world is abuzz about the potential of this giant! Yet, India is home to a very large pool of "illiterates" – people who cannot read or write. Farmers struggling to eke out a living from land that has been pumped with chemical fertilisers, high yielding seeds and erratic supply of irrigation are committing suicide in many parts of India. While India is marching ahead on the IT front and setting up biotech industries – we are doing very little to enable farmers to access knowledge that can make their land more productive or even to reclaim traditional knowledge of organic farming that can restore the productivity of their land. Adult education and continuing education rarely address the real needs and concerns of people living on the margins of a society which is reported to be "developing" at breakneck speed. Livelihood opportunities for people living in tribal and in rural/remote areas are fast shrinking – we need new ideas, new ways of looking at the situation on the ground and new forums and spaces where people can reflect on their situation, debate options and help each other to break out of the vicious cycle of agrarian distress.

Many Contradictions

At another level, as we peel away the layers of the education system many contradictions reveal themselves. Larger governance issues like corruption, rent seeking and a patronage network make an already difficult situation even more resistant to reform; even well-meaning reformers at a loss about where to begin. Lofty goals are set every few years, the most recent being the nationwide effort to draft a national curriculum framework for India.[5] Yet institutions that are expected to set standards and provide leadership at different levels (international, national, state and district) have been reduced to petty fiefdoms that are least concerned about larger issues, such as the purpose of education.

The crisis faced by Indian education reflects a global concern. Be it rioting youth of migrant communities in Europe, the exasperated students in south and south-east Asia, or the palpable unrest in Americas and Africa – all these are telling something. An education system that took shape in the early industrial period is no longer able to meet the growing aspirations and needs of people across the world. The "best" are happy with the Ivy League, Oxbridge, Sorbonne, the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management their stepping stone to money, fame and power. Simultaneously, the media has equalised aspirations and raised hopes that education could indeed be the great equaliser. Yet the education that poor receive adds little real value. The real world is harsh – those on the margins are being pushed further out into the wild.

At the heart of all this is the content of education. Who gets to learn what and how much? What confidence and capabilities does it endow? Who decides what is taught in school or in adult and continuing education programmes? What accountability systems are in place to make sure that children and adults who come to school are able to engage in education in a caring and non-discriminatory environment and in a manner that enables them to realise their potential?[6] Who ensures that caste, gender, race and community prejudices are not reinforced in school? Is anyone monitoring to see if a level playing field is being created in educational programmes?

At the heart of education is the quest of relevance (content) and quality. In many ways content and quality are the heart of the struggle for equality and justice. Who determines what we learn/what we teach? The educational needs of a tribal community living in forests and mountains are surely very different from those who migrate to cities in search of livelihood. Increasing demand for minerals, ores and other natural resources to fuel rapid industrialisation is imposing unheard of hardships on people livings amidst these resources. Social and political conflicts are pushing many people across the world into ghettos with little scope for life and livelihood with dignity.

I will now try and explore these issues with respect to the educational and empowerment needs of women. While the importance of education is acknowledged by one and all the relevance of literacy in poor women's struggle for survival with dignity is not understood in its totality. Leading women activists in many parts of the world have argued that "illiteracy" is not a symbol of ignorance and making literacy a value in itself only ended up devaluing the traditional knowledge and wisdom of women and of indigenous communities. While no one consciously undervalues the importance of education per se, literacy (in such situations) is seen as not being important in itself. Collectivisation, confidence building, organisation building and leadership development – are highlighted as being of greater value.

Women and Education

In the last two decades and especially since the Cairo conference, governments across the world have declared that education of women is the key to development. The population control philosophy gave way to a theory of long-term population stabilisation and women's literacy is seen as the strategic intervention that would make "the big difference". As a result, governments of the south and donors of the north focus on the relationship between literacy, fertility and women's autonomy. It is argued that a few years of schooling or adult literacy programmes can change fertility behaviour. Ensuring girls go to school, education programmes for adolescents and women's literacy are today accepted as a three-pronged strategy to contain population growth, reduce maternal and child mortality, combat HIV and AIDS and so on. This has no doubt infused new life into the campaign for women's education.

A wide range of variables determine women's autonomy and their position in society. Studies done in different parts of the world seem to show a broad correlation between women's position and fertility. However, innumerable studies have also shown that other factors like declining maternal and child mortality, access to reliable healthcare facilities, confidence over the survival of children, access to contraception and five to eight years of schooling leading to delay in the age of marriage exert a strong influence on family size – even in situations where women are not empowered or enjoy a good status in society. This has encouraged some demographers and policy-makers to argue that women's empowerment is a desirable long-term goal, but in the short run improving the quality of primary healthcare and enhancing the basket of contraceptives (especially for spacing) and providing condoms could turn the tide.

The "next-best" policy intervention for the government is to promote women's education, employment, income generation, credit and saving and so on. This is the new "magic bullet" promoted by leaders in the north and the south. Almost all such interventions in the above areas are justified on

the expected impact on fertility, infant and child mortality and morbidity and maternal mortality rates, containing HIV and AIDS. Women are viewed as autonomous agents. Little effort is made to address larger patriarchal structures, male responsibility and male involvement in child survival, in the spread of HIV and AIDS and the vulnerability of women even in monogamous relationships. Notwithstanding prevalent gender relations – women's involvement is seen as the key to improving access to water and sanitation, household income, primary education, family health, environment protection – the list is endless. As a result literacy programmes for adult women are overloaded with "information" that women supposedly need.

Whether such educational interventions ultimately improve women's situation in the society or position within the family is an open question. Creating opportunities for income generation without initiating processes that help women gain greater control over the income they earn has been found counterproductive. Similarly, involving groups of women in thrift and credit groups without building their capabilities to critically analyse, gain greater understanding and control the process can become a disempowering experience. Literacy drives which mechanically transfer reading skills have been shown to have little impact on the overall development of women. The newly acquired skills are forgotten quickly in the absence of a larger literate environment where newspapers, story books and other reading materials are readily available. Just look into south Asian families – urban areas are full of cases where young office going women hand over their entire income to their husband or mother-in-law and continue to be as oppressed and exploited as their illiterate sisters. In the last 20 years, there is a realisation that isolated interventions – be it in education, income generation or collectivisation – have little impact. What seems to work is a multi-pronged strategy and an approach that addresses the educational and empowerment needs of individuals and communities.

Women's autonomy and empowerment is not a simple linear process. Education, if understood in a broad sense, essentially involves opening the minds, enhancing self-esteem and self-confidence, building a sense of positive self-worth, accessing information and tools of knowledge and acquiring the ability (the collective strength) to negotiate this unequal and unjust world from a position of strength. Education, seen in this light, goes beyond literacy and schooling.

Can literacy be a vehicle for the attainment of other development goals, namely, improvement in the quality of life of poor women, enhanced income, control over income, access to information and the tools of knowledge to negotiate a hostile environment? Linking education to survival issues of the poor, especially women, has remained a challenge.

The situation may seem grim. But as we look closer and listen carefully, young people across the world are not in a mood to take this lying down. May be there is the silver lining. There is an urgent need to re-imagine literacy and education, overhaul the system and link education to life, livelihood, peace and social justice. While striving for equality, the education system should be able to respond to both aspirations and opportunities while enhancing choices. A farmer should be able to enhance her productivity, weigh the pros and cons of traditional and modern technologies and make informed choices. Children living in a multicultural environment should have an opportunity to learn about each other while creating bonds of shared experiences – at the same time learning from the catastrophic consequences of racism, parochialism and communalism on humanity. Skilled and unskilled workers should be able to negotiate just wages and resist gender and age inequalities that exist. The education system should have the depth as well as the range to span different worlds that people live in and also create bridges. A child born into a community which is rooted in a traditional occupation must have the opportunity to move out if she so wishes or infuse modern technologies or marketing opportunities into a traditional occupation. This has implications for the global literacy programme and the education system. We may have to reconstruct education in such a way that it provides multiple points of entry and exit, accommodate the varying paces of learning and enable people to stand tall where they are and reach out to the world with confidence.[7]

This can happen only if people who are committed to an alternative vision have the courage to put an end to the mindless pursuit of numbers (also known misleadingly as "goals") and focus on content and processes. This is the only way we can strengthen the voices clamouring for "true education".

> The English word "education" etymologically means "drawing out". That means an endeavour to develop our latent talents. The same is the meaning of kilavani, the Gujarati word for education. When we say that we develop a certain thing, it does not mean that we change its kind or quality, but that we bring out the qualities latent in it. Hence "education" can also mean "unfoldment"… In this sense, we cannot look upon knowledge of the alphabet as education. This is true even if that knowledge gains us the MA degree… True education is something different. Man is made of three constituents, the body, mind and spirit. Of them, spirit is the one permanent element in man. The body and the mind function on account of it. Hence we can call that education which reveals the qualities of spirit… Education can also be understood in another sense; that is, whatever leads to a full or maximum development of all the three, the body, mind and spirit, may also be called education. The knowledge that is being imparted today may possibly develop the mind a little, but certainly it does not develop the body and spirit. I have a doubt about the development of the mind too, because it does not

mean that the mind has developed if we have filled it with a lot of information. We cannot therefore say that we have educated our mind. *Navajivan Education Supplement*, February 28, 1926 (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 30, pp 58-59, taken from NCTE website Gandhi on Education). EPW

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Notes

[This article is based on the keynote speech given on October 2, 2006 at the Frankfurt Book Fair Literacy and Basic Education Campaign.]

1 UNESCO: Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2006.

2 UNESCO definition of literacy: "A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development (p 30, EFA GMR 2006).

3 Delors, Jacques and others, 1996, *Learning: The Treasure Within: Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*, UNESCO, Paris.

4 The relationship between education and democracy is like an invisible spiral that helps those in control remain there and those at the bottom alienated and voiceless. As it has manifested itself in independent India, education impacts through its potential of enhancing the capability of people the substantive practice of democracy more than the formal system of elections. Education has the potential of enhancing the capability of people. As Dreze and Sen argue: 'Capability' refers to the alternative combinations of functioning from which a person can choose. Thus the notion of capability is essentially one of freedom – a range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead. Poverty, in this view, lies not merely in the impoverished state in which the person actually lives, but also in the lack of real opportunities – given by social constraints as well as personal circumstances – to choose other types of living" (Dreze and Sen 2002, pp 35-36). Lack of access to education of acceptable quality actively inhibits the development of the capability of citizens to engage with democratic institutions thereby denuding the practice of democracy (Vimala Ramachandran, 'Democratic Inequalities: The Dilemma of Elementary Education in India', paper prepared for CSDS, New Delhi project on democracy, October 2005).

5 NCERT, 'Government of India: National Curriculum Framework', New Delhi, 2005.

6 Unfortunately excellence is juxtaposed to equity/social justice/sensitivity to different forms of discrimination. This has as much relevance in countries like India which are riven by caste and religion as in the north/south where race, religion and other ethnic identities are tearing the social fabric. Also institutes of excellence/universities and the main stream academia do not address these issues as a part of academic discourse and it is unwittingly transferred to the realm of activism, thereby diluting the whole issue itself.

7 Adapted by the author from Vimala Ramachandran: 'Quality, the Heart of Equity', written for the American Academy in May 2006.