

Adult Education: A Tale of Empowerment Denied

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The National Adult Education Programme and the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) failed to live up to their initial promise. Corruption undermined the former, a grants-in-aid scheme, and a quick-fix approach the latter, besides the stress on the commitment of individual administrators rather than on system reform that injured both. One upshot was that an opportunity for the empowerment of women that unexpectedly presented itself was squandered.

THE early fifties were euphoric days for India. We had confidence in the future, in our people and in the capability of the system to deliver the goods. China was working wonders in the field of education. We were confident that we too could do well. There was a feeling that adult literacy would happen in our country in due course. Of course, it was not on the priority list. The Nehru era focused on infrastructure development, the building of institutions of higher education and technical education, and primary education. The Education Commission (1964-66) raised the issue of adult literacy and called for 'liquidating illiteracy', advocating a selective as well as mass approach. But that did not translate into concrete programmes.

It was not until after the emergency of the mid-seventies that the government decided to initiate a nationwide programme for the eradication of illiteracy. The National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) was launched on October 2, 1978. The 1970s was an era of radical literacy movements which saw literacy as an emancipatory tool.

In the immediate post-emergency period the NAEP created space for the involvement of non-governmental organisations and social action groups in the literacy movement. This was hailed as a progressive step. The government was not seen as the primary vehicle for adult literacy and empowerment at that time. The programme was motored by a scheme of grants to voluntary organisations. Gradually, however, the government created adult education units with the mandate to run literacy classes. Given the severe resource crunch, the government relied on part-time instructors who were paid very modest honorariums. It was argued that this was just a token effort designed to encourage young rural men and women to teach adults in their own community.

The intended goal was education, not just literacy. Literacy was seen as a tool

in a larger effort to create awareness. It was believed that this would give adults the confidence to reach out to information and knowledge, acquire new skills and walk with their heads held high. During the early years, the NAEP evoked a great deal of enthusiasm. The voluntary sector was just emerging as a force to reckon with. These "non-party political formations" were hailed as harbingers of social change – which the election-oriented political parties had ceased to be. Given the post-emergency scenario in India, the very presence of community-based social action groups and voluntary agencies was seen as a triumph for democracy. The decisive electoral verdict against Indira Gandhi in 1977 and the restoration of democratic processes thereafter seemed to signal the beginning of a new era. The post-emergency euphoria coupled with the recognition that the state alone could not deliver the goods in an iniquitous market-oriented society acted as a spur for new movements, organisations, activities and actors. Though Indira Gandhi returned to the helm in 1980 voluntary organisations had come to stay by then, as had the literacy programme. Something had changed between 1975 and 1979.

WHAT WENT WRONG WITH NAEP

The centrality of popular education in workers' struggles and radical movements had come to be accepted by the late seventies. Education for social justice and equality was the slogan of that era, extending into the early eighties. Entrusting the task of adult education to the emerging voluntary sector seemed to be a logical step. While this situation was sought to be exploited by opportunists with an eye on the readily-available funds, it also set the stage for many genuine groups inspired by Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich to do remarkable work in participatory learning.

Unfortunately, the NAEP got discredited within 10 years of its launching. Anil

Bordia, the dreamer who conceptualised the programme and nurtured it during the first few years, admitted this: "As it consciously tried to move away from being identified with the government programme, it provided for greater participation of voluntary agencies...Inherent structural deficiencies, coupled with inflexibilities of all kinds and at all levels – in the timing of the centres, in numbers enrolled, in the provision of funds, and in the bureaucratised, hierarchical attitudes – led to a situation where the NAEP, which had had a promising start became another ineffective government programme" [Bordia and Kaul 1992].

What were these 'inherent structural deficiencies'? Systems set up for making grants and monitoring their use did not function well: corruption, misutilisation of funds (especially by influential people who set up voluntary organisations), grossly inadequate payments to literacy instructors and abysmal support structures eroded credibility. Evaluation showed that many voluntary organisations did little. There were many cases of bogus organisations receiving funds, and in some areas the programme became yet another patronage network of the powerful. There were examples of organisations that received enormous funds but made little impact on literacy levels. While there were also examples of pathbreaking work, such success stories were few and far between.

Having invested millions of rupees, the government decided to switch to a campaign mode in 1988 when the NAEP was wound up and the total literacy campaign (TLC) launched. The emphasis changed from adult education to adult literacy.

The decline of the NAEP sent out the signal that problems were inherent in government-sponsored, centrally-administered grant-in-aid schemes. Given the prevalent administrative culture, any grant-in-aid programme faces the danger of partisanship and politicisation. Creating administrative and financial systems that are transparent and accountable, and sustainable as well, is not easy. The difficulties did not receive due attention. The administrators who designed the programme placed too much reliance on the capabilities of committed civil servants. The importance of transparent systems for selection of voluntary agencies, rules, regulations and objective criteria for the evaluation of progress was not adequately appreciated.

Outdated grant-in-aid procedures shrouded in bureaucratic secrecy, erratic financial flows and a tendency to keep the voluntary agencies on tenterhooks *vis-a-vis* grants further compounded the prob-

lem. This system bred petty corruption. It was not uncommon for voluntary organisations to pay speed money to ensure timely release of funds. The sad truth is that such phenomena are widespread in grant-in-aid schemes in the fields of education, women's development, rural development, environment and so on.

Nor can we place much reliance on administrators having activist inclinations and endowed with charisma. Such administrators make little effort to initiate reform within the system. Impatient with mainstream structures, they are given to bypassing the system and creating alternative management structures. What they apparently fail to realise is that the mainstream administrative culture gradually eats into alternative structures. Such administrators refuse to acknowledge the inherent limitations of a charismatic leader model. Rarely looking beyond their tenures, they seem to ignore the prevalence of corruption and mismanagement in such system. The upshot of all this was that many social activists and organisations who had done good work through the NAEP gradually moved out of 'adult education' and went into participatory development. Most of them opted out of government schemes and started mobilising funds from donor agencies. Decline in the NAEP's credibility had led to widespread disillusionment with the very concept of adult education.

FROM ADULT EDUCATION TO LITERACY

As in the case of the NAEP, voluntary organisations, social action groups and village-based social animators were the mainstay of the TLC. But there was a difference. The literacy mission was positioned as a time-bound campaign involving a wide range of actors as 'partners' in social mobilisation. The centre-based approach gave way to intensive time-bound literacy classes conducted by volunteers. 'Zilla saksharata samitis' (district literacy societies) were created to bring together people from the administration, voluntary groups and national resource agencies like the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samitis (BGVS), an offshoot of the communist movement in Kerala, as well as individual social activists. This structure was created to transfer initiative to the community and generate a momentum for literacy through creative environment-building. Jathas – processions for social mobilisation which use theatre, music and dance as tools – were to be the instrument of environment building.

Literacy volunteers were recruited and trained. They were asked to run classes

for six months – in which time the adult learners were expected to complete learning the first primer. The scheme also provided for post-literacy centres called Jana Shikshan Nilayam. The fulcrum around which the entire campaign was to revolve was the district collector – who was also the chairperson of the zilla saksharata samiti, a government-created autonomous society. It was hoped that this structure would foster genuine partnership between the district administration and social activists, community leaders, eminent people and of course ordinary citizens interested in working for the campaign.

Civil servants were expected to initiate and lead a mass campaign. They were also expected to galvanise the entire administration to work in campaign mode. In short, they were asked to keep their bureaucratic training to one side and plunge into social activism. The legacy of the dispassionate and neutral civil servant was laid to rest.

Like the NAEP, the literacy campaign was designed for the exceptionally committed or exceptionally ambitious civil servant. It was beyond the reach of routiners howsoever competent. The Zilla Saksharata Samiti was to have a great deal of flexibility. It was expected to combine the outreach and authority of the government with the flexibility of voluntary organisations. The 'empowered committee' – the executive committee – was to include representatives of civil society. Funds were to be channelled directly from the union government, the state governments being bypassed.

When the country was plunged into a communal cauldron during the early nineties, a social worker from Uttar Pradesh commented that the expenditure incurred on the literacy campaign, an election campaign and the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign were not different from one another: who can tell how many organisations secretly fed and housed 'kar sevaks'. The reality is that there was no foolproof system to monitor the environment-building stage of the TLC. The system hinged on the key administrators' political proclivities. While the department of education (ministry of human resources development) appointed people with known secular credentials in decision-making bodies during the early years, Indian politics itself was changing colour in the mean time. Such criticism notwithstanding, the TLC did capture the imagination of many organisations, civil servants and ordinary people.

Women responded in large numbers making the campaign a potential force for the mobilisation and empowerment of women. Such unexpected spin-offs emerged as the greatest validation of the campaign. In an otherwise bleak scenario, this aspect of the literacy campaign reopened the debate on education as a tool for women's empowerment and equality. The women's movement, which had hitherto had an ambivalent stand on adult education and literacy, took note of the mobilisation of women, particularly in Pudukottai district of Tamil Nadu and Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh – where it was unprecedented.

In Nellore, a coastal district, the initial

social mobilisation for literacy in 1991 was successful, and many women came forward to participate in literacy classes. One seemingly unimportant chapter taught in the classes described the effect of alcoholism on the family and the efforts in some parts of the country to fight the social evil. Maybe the time was just right or maybe the women of Nellore were quite fed up with the havoc alcohol has created in their lives, but this chapter galvanised them. Almost overnight, thousands of women came out of their homes, and the 'anti-arrack' movement of 1992 was born. District officials involved in the literacy campaign were not just sympathetic to the movement. They encouraged it. As the movement picked up momentum, the state government declared prohibition in April 1993.

Changing government policy was a heady experience, and during one of the victory celebrations women discovered the magic formula of self-help groups. This discovery led to the birth of the savings movement. In just two years, nearly 6,000 savings groups called 'Podupulakshmi' came up. The government then decided to create a women's bank. This was a mistake. Women who had got used to handling their own money and who had experienced the power of decentralised decision-making were reluctant to hand over their savings to an impersonal banking system. The savings movement lost its momentum and gradually petered out, though many groups reportedly continue to function quietly.

In Pudukottai, an impoverished district, the literacy campaign led to unprecedented mobilisation of rural women in 1992. The bicycle became the instrument of empowerment of women in this area. Thousands of women learnt to ride it. Acquisition of the means for greater mobility alongside literacy skills was the distinguishing feature of the campaign as it developed in this district.

The women of Nellore and Pudukottai may not have mastered literacy skills, but the literacy campaign changed their lives. As Avik Ghosh observed in 1997:

The...anti-arrack movement launched by rural women in Nellore district became possible because the literacy centres provided a forum for women to meet, share experiences and discuss issues...While it was never the national literacy mission's intention to create confrontation between people and the administration, the facilitative factors of a volunteer-based and loosely structured programme provided the space for people to think and act freely. The district officials and the literacy workers, on their part, facilitated and provided positive support to their cause...The TLC provided, for the first time on such a large scale, a forum for

participation and dialogue, discussion, learning and sharing among volunteers (agents of change) and learners (those desirous of change).

Large-scale campaigns impart dynamism and the will to change to their participants, and this was more than demonstrated in some districts in the context of the TLC. Literacy classes and the group discussions, experience-sharing, access to information and collective action associated with them generated their own momentum. Evaluation reports and travel notes of those who visited the TLC districts show that people belonging to traditionally disadvantaged groups like the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes participated in large numbers. Women jumped into the arena with great enthusiasm.

It was too good to last. The literacy mission lost in 1993 the momentum it had gathered from 1989 to 1992. Campaign managers and administrators sitting in Delhi and in state headquarters had belied the hopes of thousands. It is now widely known that the literacy classes could not be sustained everywhere and that the continuing education programme was a non-starter. Shoddy planning, red tape and the unfortunate lack of continuity in the policies and practices of the government (as represented by senior officers) led to the demise of an otherwise exciting process. Studies conducted in Birbhum, Bilaspur and Dumka districts by the Centre for Media Studies, New Delhi in 1998 confirmed the worst fears of observers. Not much literacy happened, though people might have learnt to sign their names. But the campaign did lead to greater demand for primary education for children.

The culture of 'undo what my predecessor did' affected the literacy campaign. Moreover it was realised that the campaign was floundering in many districts. The government therefore launched 'Operation Restoration' in 1994. Twenty-five districts, most of them in 'resistant' states, were selected for special attention. It is difficult to make any categorical statement on the success of Operation Restoration. The available evidence, anecdotal and patchy, does not speak of any spectacular turnaround.

The literacy mission demonstrated that given the right environment and the right stimulus the state machinery could be galvanised into creative action. It also demonstrated beyond doubt that people, especially women, are not apathetic to learning. Beyond a particular stage in life they may find literacy skills difficult to acquire and retain, but enthusiasm for learning and acquiring knowledge does exist. Women

participated in large numbers, not because they wanted to learn the three Rs but because the campaign opened a window to the world outside. Women may not have learnt to read and write, but they certainly learnt to think, question themselves, speak their minds and work collectively.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

The literacy campaign is a story of missed opportunities. Wherever the campaign made an impact, women came forward. Poor rural women got a glimpse of a brave new world. In Nellore women came out of their homes, made alliances, worked closely with the administration and tried to change government policy. This generated greater awareness of social issues and encouraged the women to think strategically. The anti-liquor movement gradually gave place to the savings movement. Women formed groups to pool their savings and tap the corpus thus created for consumption and production loans. It was estimated in April 1995 that there were 6,600 savings pools bringing together more than 2 lakhs women. The groups had mobilised Rs 6 crore and gained access to Rs 3.75 crore through the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), and the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas. It was an exceptional success story. It spawned a move to initiate a movement called 'People's health in people's hands'. The environment could not have been more favourable.

Here was a historic opportunity to use education as a tool for the generation and consolidation of people's power. But it was not to be. Adult educators and campaign managers packed their bags and left. They did not recognise the potential of a village-level institutional base for the promotion of life-long learning. The Andhra Pradesh government saw in the savings movement only an opportunity to build a women's bank. The confidence women in Nellore gained through the literacy campaign, the anti-arrack movement and the savings movement is still with them, but they have lost their collective strength. Women in Pudukottai, where cycling came to represent mobility and autonomy for women, narrate similar experiences.

After one has talked to a wide range of actors involved in the literacy campaign, a disturbing picture emerges. There was no strategic thinking – either in New Delhi or at the district level. Collectors, like most career civil servants, have a short time horizon. The literacy campaign gave them an opportunity to shoot into prominence, make a splash and then move on.

The painstaking process of nurturing a movement, helping ordinary people consolidate their new-found identity and strength and building sustainable organisational structure is alien to the civil service ethos. Unfortunately for India's development administration the average administrator does not think beyond his own tenure of, say, three to five years. The administrative culture does not encourage building on the achievements of predecessors. On the contrary a tendency to negate the contributions of predecessors has taken hold.

The literacy campaign was launched and justified as a quick-fix movement for the "eradication" of illiteracy. It was never conceived as a spark that would ignite a movement for lifelong learning.

The country seems to have given up strategic planning during the early seventies. What it needs are programmes with a long-term vision, whether the goal be child survival, safe motherhood, adult literacy or universal primary education. Quick-fix campaigns can at best provide the initial momentum. Again what we need

to do is recognise the inherent limitations of our system and design programmes and schemes that are not dependent on the individual commitment, values and proclivities of extraordinary civil servants. We need transparent processes and systems which are open to scrutiny by the public – to be administered by run-of-the-mill civil servants who are accountable.

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