

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DARK SIDE OF LITERACY

"A tool can grow out of man's control, first to become his master and finally to become his executioner... There are two ranges in the growth of tools: the range within which they are used to extend human capability and the range in which they are used to contract, eliminate, or replace human functions. "

- Ivan Illich, 1973

Why interrogate literacy?

In conference after conference, declaration after declaration, LITERACY has been projected as necessary for Development and Progress. It is promoted as a 'universal good', a powerful and 'value-neutral' tool, which can only stand to benefit all those who imbibe it. For those promoting literacy campaigns or pursuing projects to eradicate illiteracy, even slightly doubting this sacred cow may be tantamount to heresy.

But given its complex and multiple dimensions, we feel it is timely and appropriate to investigate literacy— its core assumptions, impacts, values and what it represents. This collection is just a beginning for exploring some questions around the dangers of literacy:

- How is literacy defined, and who defines it?
- How does literacy affect the diversity of languages and expressions?
- What kinds of knowledge systems and wisdoms are facilitated (or obstructed) by literacy?
- What is the relationship between literacy and nation-building? Literacy and globalization?
- What is the impact of the textual mind on identities, relationships, and ecologies?
- What do we lose when we over-emphasize literacy?

In raising these and other questions, we should clarify one point. We are not saying that reading or writing or counting is wrong, or that people should not learn how to do it. Nor are we saying the written word is always bad. (Otherwise, we would not be publishing this booklet!)

Rather, we are trying to shake the lofty pedestal that literacy has been placed upon, as the ultimate form of communication and an automatic tool for empowerment and social justice. We are inviting you to take a more critical look at literacy — not to dismiss it entirely, but also not to wholeheartedly accept its tall claims. We hope that by paying attention to its underlying assumptions and actual consequences, we can encourage more balanced, and nuanced perspectives on literacy. Perhaps in doing so, the door to many more diverse forms of human expression and to new paradigms for living with dignity will be opened.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts, feelings and experiences with literacy. Please share your stories with us on our website <www.swaraj.org/shikshantar>, where you will also find more contributions exploring "The Dark Side of Literacy."

- the Shikshantar family

WHO IS ILLITERATE?

by

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Who Is Illiterate?

Most people consider this question to have a simple answer: illiterates are people who can neither read nor write. However, the problem is substantially more complex. Much remains to be analyzed and discussed about the definitions of literacy and illiteracy.

To start with, it is necessary to bear in mind that for the purpose of census records and official statistics, illiteracy is reduced to the category of absolute illiteracy, counting as *illiterate* only those individuals who declare themselves as such. People who can recognize the letters of the alphabet or who know how to write their own name, however, often do not consider themselves to be illiterate, and consequently do not claim to be such for statistics.

The very notion of 'illiteracy' is imprecise, and contributes to the confusion. The word defines a person in terms of deficiency (the lack of literacy), implicitly assuming that whoever knows and can work with the alphabet possesses the capacity to read and write. But this is clearly not the case. Many people know the alphabet by heart without knowing how to read or write. Francisca Naula, a woman who participated in a recent literacy campaign, told me, "When I was little, I memorised the alphabet. I could look at the letters and say 'M' and 'A'. I was told that I had to connect the two letters to say 'MA', but I didn't understand. It wasn't worth anything to know the alphabet because I couldn't read."

Moreover, the notion of 'illiteracy' is customarily associated with the lack of schooling. A person who never attended school is automatically considered *illiterate*, and one who did attend, *literate*. Nevertheless, this is not strictly the case. On the one hand, there are persons who learn to read and write on their own, with the help of a family member

or a friend, investing great effort and considerable autodidactic energy. On the other hand, school attendance and even a completed primary school career are not necessarily guarantees for learning how to read and write. Many investigations and evaluations have been conducted in this connection which go to prove the inefficacy of schools to transmit literacy not just in our own country, but also in Latin America and all over the world.

Knowing how to read is not simply knowing how to recognize and mechanically decipher a group of letters: it implies being able to correctly comprehend what is read. Knowing how to write is not just knowing how to write one's name, or being able to copy a text or take down dictation: it implies being able to clearly and correctly express one's own ideas in writing. Consequently, the measure between the concept of being *illiterate* and that of being *literate* is not just rote memorization of the alphabet, but a lengthy process of acquiring a command of the written language in different ways and on different levels. There are those who accordingly maintain that to some degree all of us are illiterate, because we are continuously perfecting our capacity to read and write comprehensively.

All the above leads us to identify the problem of illiteracy not just in census statistics or among those who never went to school, but in the very heart of our so-called "literate" population, even in university lecture halls. Ask any university professor and you will hear the recurrent complaint: many students arrive at the university without being able to write a theme, with serious difficulties in understanding the principle ideas of a text. This is what is called "functional illiteracy".

On a world level today, functional illiteracy would seem to be of even greater magnitude than absolute illiteracy. During the past few years countries as highly developed as the USA, Germany, England or France have begun to discover that they have millions of youth and adults who have attained a "formal literacy level" in the school system, but who, in reality, can neither comprehend what they read, nor express themselves in writing. What can you expect of our society, where we have not even begun to become aware of that situation,

and where no studies yet exist to help determine the magnitude of the problem?

At any event it is certain that the lack of knowledge and understanding of this vast and involved problem of illiteracy has ill-fated consequences. One is the narrow and negative judgments usually surrounding illiteracy and the very condition of the illiterate person. In connection with illiteracy we are accustomed to hearing expressions like "social anathema", "scourge", "malady", "harrowing reality", "plague", and even "vice". We speak of "eradicating" illiteracy as if it were an epidemic or sickness. The illiterate person is described with adjectives like "blind", "cultural defendant", "unfortunate illiterate", etc., evoking the image of someone who is ignorant, disabled or handicapped, and not that of a normal person characterized by the simple fact that he does not know how to read or write.

The illiterate person becomes the object of shame and guilt for being illiterate, not the society which permits and repeats this form of social injustice. In like manner, it is the student who is deemed incapable of learning or not appreciative of reading and writing, and not the educational system, which, by the grace of its methods, is able to convert learning into a tedious and sterile task, instead of the real challenge it should be, full of creativity, discovery, pleasure and fun.