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Indian Engagement with Adult Education and Literacy

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INTRODUCTION

Universalization of elementary education (UEE) and adult literacy always had an emotive tinge in national discourse and policy deliberations. These were perceived as the basic entitlement of citizens, the minimum that the state owed its people and something which had a critical role in the nation's socio-cultural and economic development and the well-being of India's democracy. Time and again, this issue of the state's basic obligation—UEE and adult education—would come up and witness new resolves, policy intents, fresh programme packages and deadlines for target achievement. It is in this background that any review of the adult literacy programme in the country has to be carried out. This chapter traces the National Literacy Missions's (NLM) journey through an anxious search and frantic efforts to lend a much needed mass character to the literacy efforts to the sense of relief when a genuinely mass movement oriented total literacy campaign (TLC) approach as adopted in Ernakulam, came to be accepted and adopted by the NLM.

Soon after the launching of the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, a thorough review of the strengths and weaknesses of past programmes of adult education was undertaken and wide-ranging consultations organized. As a result, the government initiated a move to start a number of 'missions', most of them for application of modern science and technology to developmental issues concerning the disadvantaged social groups. The NLM started in 1988 was one such mission with the aim of imparting functional literacy to 80 million adults, aged 15-35 years, by 1995 (see Bordia and Kaul 1992). Different from other Technology Missions, the NLM was conceived as a 'societal mission' to demonstrate that 'there is a political will at all levels for the achievement of Mission goals... a national consensus... for mobilization of social forces, and mechanisms...

for active participation of the people' (see DoE 1988).

The key reasons for the success of the NLM, based on strengths and weakness of earlier programmes, were identified as national commitment, motivation of learners and instructors, creation of a positive environment, mass mobilization, people's involvement including voluntary agencies, techno-pedagogic inputs, and efficient monitoring and management. The most momentous of these experiments in mass campaigns for total literacy was the one undertaken in Kottayam city of Kerala in April 1989. The District Collector of Kottayam district mobilized some 200 university student volunteers who made literate the 2000 illiterates, within 100 days (see Mishra 1992).

What started as a time-bound one-shot affair on a modest scale in Kottayam soon grew into a massive movement, first in the Ernakulam district, then the entire state of Kerala and many other states. The TLC model, which became the dominant strategy and approach of the government for adult literacy from the Eighth Five Year Plan (see DoE 1992), grew out of the Ernakulam TLC.

KEY PREMISES AND ELEMENTS OF THE TLC

In formulating the perspective and approach, the NLM document articulated some of the basic premises implicit in the programme. The idea behind bringing literacy under one of the five Technology Missions was to indicate a new sense of urgency and seriousness, a definite time-frame, people's involvement and result orientation, an area-specific approach, and cost-effectiveness. The essence, as premised by the Mission was that literacy, a basic human need, enables access to the world of information, and when it goes beyond alphabetical literacy to functional literacy, it enhances skills of communication, survival, and occupation. Literacy has to be demand driven and the need perception and demand have to be consciously aroused. This can be done through a

campaign of environment building when the transformational role of literacy is conveyed through a variety of communication forms. The community with its reservoir of innate wisdom, idealism, and voluntarism should be allowed adequate space in owning and supporting the programme.

In any discussion of literacy campaigns in India and of how the TLC approach became the NLM's dominant approach to literacy, the role of the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS) occupies an important place. Creating a need for literacy among people was the major issue facing the NLM when it set out in 1988 on the task of making 80 million people literate. The NLM's strategy of creating a mass upsurge of need and demand for literacy owed partly to the impact of the BGVS (1987) launched by people's science organizations (the All India People's Science Network—AISPN, as it was later known), led by the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP).

ERNAKULAM MODEL BECOMES THE NLM LITERACY APPROACH

The NLM brought out guidelines on different aspects of TLC processes and strategies that were closely aligned to the principles and processes adopted in the Ernakulam model. Call it the heady days or the formative period when the NLM was anxiously and zealously wanting to establish the TLC approach as the dominant and national approach: any doubts about the TLC approach or criticisms of the distortions inherent and apparent in the implementation process were seen as being inimical to the cause of the literacy movement. Such criticisms were viewed in NLM circles as being cynical and anti-literacy when the NLM was clearly orchestrating a strategy of using the media and other means to deliberately play up the movement's success (see Mishra 1998, 2809).

NLM BETWEEN 1990 AND 1998: PROGRAMME GROWTH AND ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

From 1989 to 1992, even before the Eighth Five Year Plan was launched, there were already 22 TLCs, and within barely five months, the number went up to 156. The Eighth Plan proposed to cover another 345 districts—nearly 75 per cent of the districts in India, under TLCs (see Shah 1999, 15). The progress of the NLM exceeded its target. As regards the trend, the jump from 1992 to 1993 is evident. With the focus shifting to Hindi-belt states from 1992, the acceleration of TLCs has been greater. States with high rates of transition from TLCs to post literacy campaigns (PLCs) over the 1990-5 period were Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and West Bengal, and those with low rates were Assam, Meghalaya,

Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. The middle category states with around half of their TLCs in the PLC stage were Rajasthan, Orissa, and Maharashtra, among others.

Targets and Achievements

When the NLM began, the target was to cover 80 million non-literate adults in the 15-35 age group—30 million by 1990 and another 50 million by 1995. It was subsequently revised and reset at 100 million, and the deadline was extended to 1997. The Ninth Plan again reset the deadline. The position now is—total literacy (15-35 age group) by 2000. The shift of target deadline, perhaps, is influenced by the NLM's achievement levels.

The basis of the NLM's achievement figures, meaning the number of non-literates being made literate, are the figures supplied by the TLC/PLC districts. 'Achievement level in these projects', says the NLM's Status Report (see DAE 1993a), 'is the focus of monitoring at a national level', as reported in the monthly progress reports of the districts and the consolidated reports of the state/UT Directorates of Adult Education based on their assessment of learners completing (passing in) Primer m. However, the NLM adopted differing methods of collating and arriving at the achievement figures at a national level. Till 1994, the achievement reported by TLCs about Primer ill completion was assorted under four categories, viz. districts reporting achievement levels of: (i) less than 20 per cent; (ii) 20 to 30 per cent; (iii) 35 to 50 per cent; and (iv) above 50 per cent. These were shown against the total number of TLCs and PLCs. But as the number of TLCs increased, the categories were reduced to three, and details of survey and enrolment were included. However, instead of showing achievement under the three categories against the total number of TLCs and PLCs, it was shown statewide, which makes it difficult to get an idea at a glance about target, enrolment, and achievements. This could be illustrated with two examples at two different points in time—1993 and 1997-8.

The coverage was for all programmes of the NLM, not TLCs alone. Even so, the overall achievement against the target has been 41.53 per cent (see DAE 1993a, 23). Tables 16.1 and 16.2 provide figures on NLM achievement according to internal and external assessment.

TABLE 16.1
NLM Literacy Achievement, September 1993

Total TLCs	187
TLCs with above 50% achievement	41
TLCs with 35-50%	10
TLCs with 20-35%	7
TLCs with less than 20%	30
No. of PL projects sanctioned	52

THE SOCIAL BALANCE SHEET OF INDIA'S LITERACY ENTERPRISES

Looking back at the sojourn of the NLM in the last ten years in pursuit of its objectives, some important lessons could be abstracted. On the positive side, the following could be noted:

- The initial two to three years of the NLM were also its most crucial and trying period. When literacy had no hopes in a policy milieu which viewed it as trying to 'mop the floor with the taps on' and felt that the priority should be more judiciously shifted to UEE, the NLM was able to establish the value and efficacy of literacy as an important social intervention which, in the long run, had the potential of closing even the leaking tap, of ineffective primary education, leave alone mopping up its spilt water, of illiterates.
- The social momentum that literacy and its driving engine, the NLM, gathered was truly edifying—the

initial TLCs, especially those that adopted and strictly adhered to the ethos and spirit of a people's movement, witnessed a degree of voluntary social action for literacy, unprecedented in Indian history of adult education. All the qualitative or social gains were products of this era of TLCs, which still adorn the front and central pages of NLM literature and policy fora, although they have long ceased to be the prized assets and express objectives in latter-day projects.

- Even conceding all the limitations of exaggeration, the quantitative achievements of literacy, the scale and magnitude of volunteers and social activists mobilized, social mobilization achieved, and innovative methodologies of social motivation and mobilization witnessed were truly unparalleled. These must remain the singular inspirations, especially if we consider the socio-political milieu which did not seem conducive. The only problem was that these ceased to be enshrined in the preambles and objectives of the programmes as condition for sanction or as yardsticks of its merit when it came to evaluation.
- The methodology adopted for implementation of the mass literacy campaigns brought in a breath of fresh air. The creation of the autonomous ZSS, with the District Collector as Chairperson and with more than 50 per cent representation to NGO forces, and directly placing funds under its disposal, and endowing it with flexibility and autonomy, cut out the proverbial hierarchism and red tape which were the bane of the centre-based approach. This single decision, if zealously guarded, valued, and

enforced, imbued the necessary commitment, had the potential of aligning administration closely with the people on behalf of the people's movement for literacy. In a limited number of cases, this happened. That was all. In most cases it became ineffective and remained so without the NLM doing its watchdog role.

On the negative side, the following could be abstracted:

- Gradual erosion of political and government priority for literacy.
- The inherent short-lived character of campaign effectiveness and the difficulty involved in sustaining voluntarism, public interest, and involvement and priority of district administration.
- Political instability at central and state levels and the lack of consistency regarding priority to literacy.
- The NLM policy and leadership's inability to come to terms with the erosion of the people's movement character of the literacy enterprise. The NLM's response was largely in the nature of skirting the real issues; relying heavily on administrative streamlining measures. What was called for was candid admission of the decline trends and measures that would uphold the people's movement philosophy and objectives where at least NLM policy could not have been faulted for the decline.
- Indiscriminate expansion, stung by the dramatic success of initial TLCs, but without regard to their contextual constraints, compounded by lack of commitment and preparedness of districts vying for TLCs, and the compulsion of 'targetitis', resulted in overreporting of achievements and erosion of credibility of TLCs. The severely deficient view of assessing the achievement of the campaigns led to the neglect of all that was valuable and self-sustaining in the movement. All these contributed to the steady erosion of credibility and life of the literacy movement.
- As political priority for literacy was dwindling, it was reflected in the sidelining of literacy priority in the agenda of district administration. Dragging TLCs, bureaucratization of the programme, and ritualization of the process, as a result of non-internalization of the TLC ethos and philosophy or commitment to it, went on with impunity as far as the state governments and districts were concerned, and the NLM could, and did, very little about it.

Today, one can hardly find any sympathizers of the NLM even among those who were once its most avowed proponents (activists). This cuts across the entire spectrum of learners, volunteers, activists, NGOs, progressive citizens, the community, and even many within the official machinery. Their disillusionment is not with literacy, but what has happened to the literacy movement. The NLM is, indeed, in need of a moral and ideological renewal or else the literacy achievement will inexorably slide to the margins of civil conscience.