

Refashioning Our Literacy Programme

It was John Stuart Mills who had once said that you cannot hope to be a great society if the members of your society continue to be dwarfs with no qualities and character. And education, both formal and informal, definitely does that remarkable value addition as is required in this age for the multi-dimensional development of a society. That's why every welfare state infused with the ethos of a liberal democracy makes all possible endeavours and essays towards provisioning elaborate arrangements for developing the human resources of their citizenry today. This effort is undertaken to make such societies as egalitarian as possible, without any traces of stratified inequalities. And one key measure of the exercise of human resource development is promotion of literacy among all members of the society with an emphasis on the three 'R', i.e., reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmatics.

While in 1971, the percentage of literacy was 22 among women, it was around 46 per cent among men. The figures improved to 39 and 64 per cent respectively among the two gender categories by 1991. And if the latest Census data, as published in April, 2011, are to be believed, the number of people who can read and write in India today is around 74 per cent, with male literacy being 82 per cent and female literacy being 65 per cent.

The Government of India, in keeping with the 'Directive Principles of State Policy' as enshrined in Part IV of the Constitution of India, has been formulating customised programmes for various sections of our society to increase the level of literacy in our country. The Government of India in coordination with all the state governments have been conceiving and executing ambitious literacy programmes to take Indian citizenry out of the darkness of illiteracy and ignorance. All these plans have been implemented in synergy and synchrony with the cognate programmes of the state governments with varied success. But notwithstanding all these herculean efforts over the years involving substantive public expenditure, a substantial number of our populace continue to be illiterates.

Be it the National Policy on Education through its various avatars in 1968, 1979, 1986, 1991 or 2001, the Farmers' Functional Literacy Projects during the heyday of the Green Revolution during the 1960s and 1970s, the Non-Formal Education for Youth in 1975, the

National Adult Education Programme in 1978, the Rural Functional Literacy Project in 1978, the National Literacy Mission as started in 1988, the Continuing Education Programme through the first decade of the new millennium, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan or the extant Sakhshar Bharat Programme, the Government of India has always made concentrated efforts to promote the level of literacy in the country with suitable introduction of changes from time to time as required for the purpose. There have also been popular movements in this sphere duly supported by various Governments and non-government organisations, particularly the literacy movements, noticed in the 1990s, resulting in many districts of our country attaining 100 per cent literacy levels. Ernakulum in Kerala and Burdwan in West Bengal were the first and second such districts to achieve this feat in the country. However, the positive streak and motivation marking our society are no longer visible.

The latest avatar in the form of 'Sakhshar Bharat' has also been making steady headway in this direction. However, it is felt that a Government programme in this sphere would not cut much ice as long as society is not associated therewith. Ergo, the 'Sakhshar Bharat' focus on the involvement of the civil society through the instrumentality of voluntary teachers (VT) is very well taken. However, one also feels that this focus needs reorientation to be more effective and successful. As it is very difficult to find motivated volunteers, suffused with an altruistic sense of service, who would serve for free as voluntary teachers, the latest literacy programme has been running in fits and starts, thereby running into executional bottlenecks. The huge programme funds, because of non-involvement of motivated volunteers, also seem not to be producing requisite output in proportionate to the financial inputs.

The empirical insights, gained through literacy programme implementation, motivate one to broach an ideational reform in the conception and execution of literacy programmes. One firmly believes that, if rightly implemented and followed through, the same would also result not only in saving huge amount of public money, but shall also make our society better in terms of quality and character. The previous and present avatars of literacy programmes conceive of a huge army of specialised manpower yoked to the task of literacy promotion and the same involved huge government spending to boot. The following proposal shall make use of the already existing structures in the cause of literacy promotion and consequent human resource development.

The proposal involves implementing literacy programmes through our school and college kids in keeping with our literacy slogan of yesteryears, i.e., 'each one teach one (sic)'. While the modality and finer details of actual programme implementation are subject to further debate and discussion, one does feel that involvement of our school and college kids can revolutionise and completely transform the literacy scenario in the country. To start with, the school and higher education departments of respective state governments should make it compulsory for the high school and college youths to participate in a literacy programme. The responsibilities of these youths under able guidance of their teachers could range from organising these literacy camps/classes to teaching the learners themselves.

A school or a college could act as the programme implementation unit (PMU) in their respective bailiwicks. The various funding to the educational institutions including those meant for the literacy programmes could be allotted to such schools/colleges in proportion to

their overall performance, to be measured by the parameters set for the purpose. The literacy component could be one of the key factors in such evaluations. The motivation for the school/college kids shall be specially earmarked scores to be awarded to them in keeping with their performance by the teacher/faculty assigned for the purpose of such evaluation. Such scores shall be added to the overall academic performance of these kids. The arrangement of awarding special marks for participation in literacy programme shall not only motivate our youths to participate in a socially productive programme, but shall also make them a responsible citizen. Such a move shall also sensitise them to the sundry problems afflicting our society

There shall also be no need to create or hire additional space for running these literacy camps/classes as the same shall be run at the premises of respective schools or colleges. The involvement of our youths in a community building exercise shall be an enriching and enlightening experience for them which shall also help the cause of 'nation building', promoting national feeling among them in a society under attacks from different fissiparous and reactionary forces. This shall also encourage a positive competition among various schools and colleges towards excellence.

With right mentoring, their positive energies shall be channelled properly in strengthening the pillars of our body politic. If implemented in right earnest, the scheme of things as proposed above, is cinch to be a success with little need to spend even a dime. However, the proposal does not mean that all other ways to involve the civil society in such an exercise should not be tried. The above proposal is only one of the very effective ways to involve them. If carried out effectively with suitable monitoring and supervision, such a programme shall definitely be more effective with least of leakage or wastage of resources. It shall also be one of the effective ways to reap our famed demographic dividends.

Salient Points

- One key measure of the exercise of human resource development is promotion of literacy emphasising the three 'R', i.e., reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic.
- The Government of India in coordination with all the state governments have been conceiving and executing ambitious literacy programmes.
- Ernakulum in Kerala and Burdwan in West Bengal were the first and second such districts to achieve 100% literacy rates in the country.
- 'Sakhshar Bharat' focus on the involvement of the civil society through the instrumentality of voluntary teachers.
- If rightly implemented, it would result in saving huge public money and make our society better in terms of quality and character.
- One New proposal involves implementing literacy programmes through our school and college kids in keeping with our literacy slogan of yesteryears i.e., 'each one teach one'.
- A school or a college could act as the programme implementation unit (PMU).
- The arrangement of awarding special marks for participation in literacy programme shall motivate our youths to participate in a socially productive programme and make them a responsible citizen.
- If carried out effectively with suitable supervision, it shall definitely be more effective with least of leakage of resources.

Glossary

Cognate: related by birth

Suffused: to overspread with or as with a liquid

Broach: to enlarge and finish with a broach

Yoked: a device for joining together a pair of draft animals

Bailiwicks: the district within which a bailie or bailiff has jurisdiction

Fissiparous: reproducing by fission