

## **Empowerment of Women Through Literacy – An Innovative Experiment in West Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh.**

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Many changes have been taken place over the last few years in terms of women empowerment through various economic programmes. Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWACRA) is one such important programmes introduced by the Government for development of women. The main objective of this programme is to provide income-generating skills and activities to poor women thereby bring about change in quality of life of women and children of the selected families. This programme also reflects the change in the policy from individual oriented schemes to group based programmes, which enhance bargaining power and decision making ability through collectivisation.

Development theorists as well as development planners have asserted that literacy does often mean higher income for the new literate both in urban and rural settings. In the rural setting, the new literate is able to make use of such economic institutions as extension activities, rural banks and marketing co-operatives. In the urban setting, literacy contributes to higher income, to safety on the job, and to the possibility of unionization to protect economic interests.

Akshara Mahila (AM) is a special programme conceived and implemented in West Godavari district to impart and improve literacy skills among the members of Women Self Help Groups (WSHGs). Its is designed in such a way that literacy is made a part of group activity as thrift and savings.

It is clear and convincing fact that today both culture and technology are based on universal literacy. Though literacy has wide range of meanings and definitions - from reading the word to reading the world, it is an important tool for communication, learning and information. And a virtual precondition for individual and national development.

Illiteracy need not be equated with ignorance, yet it is an unsatisfactory condition. The need for a re-organisation in values and norms, and the importance of fostering the political, economic and social skills of citizens is accepted as part of the developmental agenda. Research throughout the world has shown that the list of characters that accrue from literacy include individualism, objectivity, the holding of Individual opinions, a capacity for logical analysis and context-independent abstract thinking, a sense of history and universalism.

## **Conceptualization of the Programme**

**Local initiative and group based:** In the process of socio-economic and political development, the civil society is organizing itself into different associations to satisfy their developmental needs. Government is also promoting such groups and associations like cooperatives, self help groups, professional bodies, stock holders associations etc. One such group is Women Self Help Group (WSHGs) which are popularly known as DWACRA groups are selected to improve women literacy in the district. The group will take initiative to educate their own group members.

**Approach:** Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) is basically a mass based campaign with district as a unit. Akshara Mahila followed a group based selective approach. The women in self-help groups are already organized as groups in economic activity. The same self help spirit is expanded to literacy to satisfy their functional needs. The programme is planned in such a way that the group would identify the learners from their group, selects the volunteers from the group members and decides the timings and place. The expenditure for volunteers training and teaching material is met by the group themselves. Zilla Saksharatha Samithi (ZSS) provides only learning material.

**Duration:** The teaching and learning process in TLC is for six months and it does take into account the variations in agriculture seasons. Many learners are reluctant to attend literacy classes because of the long duration. Research and experience shows that it is difficult to sustain learners and volunteers' motivation for long duration and short term intensive programmes are more successful. So the programme is planned for three months so as to suit for slack agriculture seasons of the district.

**Teaching & learning material and methods:** Though TLC primers are based on Improved Pace and Content of Learning (IPCL) approach, they are produced in analytical method of teaching which is commonly known as word or sentence method. This method can be used effectively only by highly qualified instructors, but availability of such volunteers is very limited. Further, most of the volunteers are trained in synthetic method in schools and this method is entirely new to them.

Primers used in Akshara Mahila are prepared based on experience in teaching adults. Theoretically synthetic method is followed in the primers and used traditional alphabetical sequence of Telugu for easy learning. As per the recent report published by National Literacy Mission, Synthetic method, which is popular as letter method proved far superior to the word method in every aspect of learning. Reading and writing are separated taking into consideration of cognitive skills of adults for fast learning. Group teaching methods are adopted for effective teaching and make it easy and interesting to

the adult illiterates. The primers were experimented in a pilot centre and thoroughly revised to suit the learning needs of women group.

**Cost:** Generally in TLC cost per learner is in the range of Rs.70/- to Rs. 90/- including the cost of environment building. As now the expenditure on awareness campaign is not necessary as the people in organised groups realized the importance of literacy, the cost is reduced to that extent. Thus the expenditure in this programme is the lowest when compared to any other literacy activity. Only learning material i.e. one reading book and one work book and a pencil is supplied to the learners in addition to the administrative and technical support by ZSS. All other expenditure like teaching aids, etc is born by the group itself.

**Table showing the differences**

<i>Specification</i>	<i>Total Literacy Campaign</i>	<i>Group Based Approach</i>
Unit	District	Group
Approach	Mass campaign	Selective
Mode of reaching people	Mass publicity campaign	Personal interaction
Duration of course	Six months (200 hours)	Three months (180 hours)
Primers	Uniform for all the people	Group specific
Method of teaching	Analytic (word/sentence)	Synthetic (alphabetic)
Cost per learner	Rs.70.00 to Rs.90.00	Rs. 15.00 to Rs.20.00

When the two approaches are compared, TLC is effective in awareness generation and mass mobilization, whereas, AMP's group based approach is more result oriented in terms of actual teaching and learning activity, cost and time. The former is useful in macro process and later is efficient in micro process of teaching and learning.

### **Operationalisation of the Programme**

*Akshara Mahila* Programme was launched on April 5<sup>th</sup> 2000. Sri.K.Vidyadhara Rao, Hon'ble Minister for Major Industries, Government of Andhra Pradesh. All the MLAs and other people's representatives started the programme in their respective constituencies. Smt. Poonam Malkondiah, Collector and District Magistrate, West Godavari District, who is also chairperson of Zilla Saksharatha Samithi took personal initiative and planned the programme systematically.

1. SHGs who were interested in taking up this programme and volunteers and learners were identified by the District Rural Development Agency and Paschima Godavari Akshara Samithi with the help of Mandal Literacy Organisers (MLOs) and Additional Gram Savikas (AGSs) from March 2 – 15,2000.
2. Group leaders of selected groups were apprised on the programme at the meeting conducted at mandal level between March 16 – 19, 2000
3. Training to Mandal Resource persons and MLO on teaching methods was conducted at the divisional the level between March 20 – 22, 2000.
4. The Mandal Resource Persons and MLOs trained volunteers at cluster level for two days between March 24 – 31, 2000
5. A system of weekly monitoring was introduced. MPDO reviewed the progress of the programme every Monday with MLO and AGS.

## **Response**

**Enthusiaum:** Lot of enthusiasm was generated among the women and SHGs on this programme. Nearly 4500 groups have been involved and 3697 volunteers undertook the programme by teaching 37,283 learners. Groups themselves bore the cost for volunteers training and teaching aids. Most of the groups prepared flashcards on their own. They also made arrangements for running the centres by providing lighting and other facilities. Short duration of the course and simple methods of teaching attracted the learners towards this programme. Learners were able to identify alphabets from second day onwards and that gave them psychological satisfaction and motivation.

**Adoption of Centres:** Responding to the appeal made by the Collector, individuals and organisations adopted Akshara Mahila Centres and provided necessary support. They motivated the learners, monitored the classes, provided resource support and taught the lessons when volunteer is absent. In some cases where retired teachers adopted the centres, they trained the volunteers and made necessary arrangements for teaching the classes regularly and taught themselves when the volunteers are weak in teaching.

**Donations:** Large number of philanthropic individuals and organizations came forward and donated in cash and kind to the centres. For instance, Delta paper mill,

Bhimavaram donated two and a half tons of paper for workbook and Godavari Printers, Eluru printed the books free of cost. In number of places local persons provided teaching aids, lighting facilities, additional notebooks, etc.

**Procedure for assessment:** Evaluation of learning outcomes has been conducted to all the learners who attended the Akshara Mahila Centres. The definition given by the Director of Census Operations and levels prescribed by National Literacy Mission.

Quantitative	Qualitative
No. of Groups involved - 4500	No. of learners completed the course – 29831
No. of volunteers - 3697	No. of trainings with 100% attendance - 150
No. of learners enrolled- 37283	No. of learners who secured more than 50% - 24049
No. training camps conducted- 228	

#### **Evaluation by National Service Scheme:**

In order to get the correct picture of learning outcomes, Programme Officers of NSS, who are outside the implementing agency and who can independently assess the strengths and weaknesses, were asked to conduct the evaluation. Sri.N.Sanjeeva Rao, District Programme Officer, NSS, Andhra University has conducted the evaluation with the help of collage programme officers. The conducted the assessment in 144 centres and gave the report to the Collector. It was stated in the report that sixty five percent of learners have acquired literacy skills in the Akshara Mahila Programme. “As literacy programme are abstract in nature and do not yield result immediately, any literacy programme should not be considered a failure. The success of more than 60% in a short span of 90 days is really a wonder”. Sri Sanjeeva Rao pointed out.

#### **Future Programmes**

The implementation of Akshara Mahila Programme gave insights in planning further programme for the women in Self Help Groups. There are 16,000 women self help groups in West Godavari District with a member ship of around 2,50,000. It is estimated that there would be around 1,20,000 illiterates in these groups. A programme for covering all these illiterates has been worked out and launched on October 2, 2000.

#### **Continuing Education**

Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh Sri Nara Chandra Babu Naidu launched Continuing Education Programme for the learners of Akshara Mahila on 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2000.

The Continuing Education Programme has three components. 1) Stabilisation and upgradation of literacy skills 2) Income generating programmes 3) Quality of Life Improvement Programmes. All the Akshara Mahila learners are attached to the Continuing Education Centres, which will provide reading material and other short duration training programmes. DRDA will give necessary training through TTDC. Quality of Life Improvement Programmes will be taken up as a part of IEC Project on Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation. Initially Food and Nutrition, Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation and taken as thrust areas for QLP.

Akshara Mahila Programme gained momentum and headed towards elimination of illiteracy among the residual illiterate groups. University of Hyderabad, which conducted external evaluation of subsequent programmes commented that “West Godavari model appears to be significant and offers an alternative approach to literacy at one third in the total cost – less than half in duration with innovations in teaching and learning methodology. It also proven that convergence of programmes at grass root level will multiply the effectiveness and reinforce each other.”

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