

Literacy and Livelihood Through Self Help Groups in Urban Settings An Innovative Experiment in West Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh.

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Introduction

One of the grey areas of literacy movement in India is the lack of effective model for tackling illiteracy in urban settings. Total Literacy Campaign (TLC), a major strategy followed at present by the National Literacy Mission (NLM) to achieve universal literacy in specified target group, has not differentiated urban and rural areas in terms of approach and methodology. As a result, TLCs have not been able to show real impact in municipal areas of many successful TLC districts². The reasons for this are not far to seek. The mass mobilisation strategies used in TLCs which are effective in rural areas, are ineffective in urban localities because of its heterogeneous character -a contrast to the homogenous community nature of the rural and tribal areas. Though the non-literates in urban areas live in a literate environment, they are not a part of it. These people who live mainly on manual labour and other petty jobs do not find the necessity of literacy in their day-to-day life. Literacy is not a priority for them because they perceive that it does not have any relation to their livelihood. It is well known fact that economic advantages constitute an important motivational factor. It is perceived that livelihood comes from literacy (education), otherwise literacy and livelihood are two different, independent and isolated issues.

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 the rural banks and marketing co-operatives as well as economic opportunities in the extension activities of different Ministries and related agencies. In the urban setting, literacy contributes to higher income, to safety on the job, and to the possibility of unionisation to protect economic interests³.

But the literacy programmes in urban areas failed to establish linkage between literacy and livelihood. Therefore the critical issue is to integrate both in a systematic and complimentary manner. The integration can be done in three ways.

1. Introducing literacy in day to day life of the non-literates.
2. Introducing a new economic activity to the non-literates and imparting literacy skills to meet the educational needs arising out of that economic activity.
3. Introducing literacy component to the people who are already in an activity by developing a programme to suit the needs of that activity.

A literacy programme was conceived and implemented in West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh using third approach. In the process of socio-economic and political development, the civil society is organizing itself into different associations to satisfy their developmental needs. The Government is also promoting such groups and associations like cooperatives; self-help groups, professional bodies, stakeholders associations, etc. One such group is the Women Self-Help Groups (WSHG).

Many changes have been taken place over the last few years in respect of women empowerment through various economic programmes. Development of Women and Children in Urban Areas (DWACUA) is one such important programme 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 and 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 collectivization. These groups have been introduced as a part of Swarna Jayanthi Shahar Rojgar Yohana (SJSRY) in the urban areas of the country. Under this scheme, Neighborhood Groups (NHGs) and Neighborhood Committees (NHCs) were formed in slum areas of the municipalities and they organised the DWCUA groups. Not less than 10 women who are Below Poverty Line form into a group and organise any economic activity that includes savings and credit. They take up group based economic projects and the Government provides revolving fund and subsidy.

The DWCUA groups were selected as a unit to improve women literacy in the slum areas of the district. It was planned that the group would take initiative to educate their own group members. This programme, based on earlier an experience in rural areas in the same district named as Akshara Mahila (AM), was started from Oct 2, 2000 in West Godavari District. The programme was designed in such a way that literacy was made a part of group activity as thrift and savings.

Conceptualization of the Programme

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

Duration: The teaching-learning duration in TLC is for six months and it does take into account seasonal variations. 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 was planned for three months.

Teaching-Learning Materials and Methods: Though TLC primers are based on the 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 (IPCL) method is entirely new to them.

The primers used in the Akshara Mahila programme were 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 report⁴ 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 were 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. It was thought that the expenditure on awareness campaign would not be necessary as the people in organised groups realized the importance of literacy; the cost was reduced to that extent. Thus the expenditure in this programme was the lowest when compared to any other literacy activity. Only learning material i.e. one reading book and one work book and a pencil was supplied to the learners in addition to the administrative and technical support by ZSS. All other expenditure like teaching aids, training, etc was met by the group itself.

Differences between TLC and Group Based Approaches

<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. 25.00 to Rs.30.00

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 while the latter is efficient in micro process of teaching and learning.

Operationalisation of the Programme

The West Godavari Zilla Sakharatha Samithi and Municipal authorities jointly identified the SHGs, interested in taking up this programme. Group leaders of selected SHGs were apprised about the programme at the meeting conducted at municipality

level. Then the group leaders selected the volunteers and learners and also made arrangements for conduct of literacy classes. The municipal resource persons trained the volunteers for two days on motivational techniques and teaching methods. A system of weekly monitoring was introduced. Municipal Commissioners reviewed the progress of the programme every Monday with Municipal Literacy Organisers and Ward Coordinators. The District Collector/Chairperson of ZSS reviewed the progress every fortnight with Municipal Commissioners and MLOs.

Response

Enthusiaum: A lot of enthusiasm was generated among the women and SHGs on this programme quite similar to the environment building activities as in the TLCs. Nearly 1850 groups were involved and 1727 volunteers participated in the programme by teaching 7,832 learners. The groups themselves had borne 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. The short duration of the course and simple methods of teaching attracted the learners towards this programme. The learners were able to identify the alphabets from second day onwards and that gave them psychological satisfaction and motivation.

Adoption of Centres: Responding to the appeal made by the District 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 the volunteer was 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 were 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 a number of places, local persons provided teaching aids, lighting facilities, additional notebooks, etc.

Procedure for Assessment: Evaluation of learning outcomes was conducted in respect of all the learners who attended the Akshara Mahila Centres, according to the definition given by the Director of Census Operations and levels prescribed by the National Literacy Mission.

Evaluation by National Service Scheme

In order to get the correct picture of learning outcomes, Programme Officers of National Service Scheme, who were outside the implementing agency and who could independently assess the strengths and weaknesses, were asked to conduct the evaluation. They conducted the assessment in 144 centres found that sixty five percent of learners had acquired literacy skills in the Akshara Mahila Programme. Sri Sanjeeva Rao, who led

the team, observed that “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”.

The Akshara Mahila Programme gained momentum and headed towards elimination of illiteracy among the residual illiterate groups. The 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.

Impact of the Programme

Participation of large members of women groups in literacy campaign and its cascading effect led to not only formation of new groups but also increase in savings and corpus funds. The total corpus fund of the DWACUA groups had increased from near 5.2 crores before the campaign to 56 crores by the end of the campaign. It clearly indicates that women who participated in literacy campaign were able to develop other ways to supplement their income. Among the 830 neo-literate women who were interviewed as many as 594 (64%) contended that they earn more income because of the new knowledge and skill that they are able to acquire during literacy campaign

Literacy campaign had actively promoted gender equality and empowered the women learners in decision-making about themselves, their families and their communities. It played a significant role in improving the status of women and they have begun to express their newly found self-confidence in having a say both within and without the family. Nearly 90 percent of the women participants who have been interviewed after the campaign expressed the view that their status in the family has improved after their participation literacy campaign⁵.

Another major impact of this programme is effective convergence of literacy and skill development programmes for women - two critical components of women empowerment. Neo-literates of Akshara Mahila Programme not only enrolled in Continuing Education Centres (CECs) but also started taking active interest in their management. CECs, once acted as reading rooms for men, have become focal points of women empowerment activities. Over the next one year after launching of the programme, management of CECs, in majority of the centres (69 out of 80), came into the hands of women self-help groups. They appointed active educated members of women self groups as Preraks of the centres. Because of the keen interest of these groups in skill development programmes, various extension departments/agencies, especially adult education and municipal administration departments found CEC an ideal platform for conducting such programmes. Nearly 400 skill development/vocational trainings and quality of life improvement programmes were organised in the 80 CECs in the year 2001-02.

As pointed out by Mathew “Akshara Mahila Programme experience shows, that taking up literacy with an already organised groups, to meet a felt functional need, elicits better response. And where the literacy agenda is taken up among organised groups, basically women groups and where literacy is posited in a perspective of women empowerment, the response is even greater”⁶

Conclusion

Introducing literacy to people who are already engaged in an economic activity in a way which serves their needs was the best way to tackle adult illiteracy in the urban context. This was amply demonstrated by the experience the Akshara Mahila programme in West Godavari district in the urban areas. What came as an added advantage was the existence of the Women Self-Help Groups in the urban area, viz., the DWACUA. It was this experience that served as the torch bearer when the Akshar Mahila Programme was later up-sealed in the whole district from August 2000 and subsequently merged with the state-wide Akshar Sanskranti programme from October 2000. When scaled up, while the Akshar Sanranti became a second generation TLC, West “Godavari’s experience of using SHGs in the urban areas still remains as a shining example of an effective method of linking literacy with livelihood in urban settings.

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² As a field functionary, the researcher (Mohan Rao) found this situation in West Godavari, Nellore and Chittoor districts in Andhra Pradesh. Other researchers like Sumanta Banerjee also found a similar trend in Burdwan, Bankura and Birbhum in West Bangal.

³ Bholá, H.S, **Campaigning for Literacy: Eight National Experiences of the Twentieth Century, with a Memorandum to Decision Makers**, UNESCO 1984.

⁴ Ahmed Mushtag and K.N.Srivastava, **A Comparative Study of Analytic & Synthetic Methods of Teaching**, National Literacy Mission, DAE, New Delhi, 1997.

⁵ **Akshara Anubhavalu** (Experiences of neo-literate women on literacy acquisition and impact), Paschima Godavari Akshara Samithi, Eluru (Andhra Pradesh), 2002.

⁶ Mathew A, **The Literacy Movement in West Godavari (AP): A Report**, Paschima Godavari Akshara Samithi, Eluru (Andhra Pradesh), 2002.