

Malavika Karlekar (ed.). *Paradigms of Learning: The Total Literacy Campaign in India.* New Delhi: Sage Publications. 2004. 356 pages. Paperback. Indian Rupees 375.00.

Raising the standards of literacy in the developing world has been a major goal of the less developed countries since most of them became independent in the process of decolonisation that followed World War II. *The Human Development Report 2004*, brought out by the United Nations Development Programme lists some major improvements in increasing literacy levels of a number of countries between the year 1990 and 2002. For example, low human development countries like Togo increased their adult literacy rates from 44.2 percent in 1990 to 59.6 percent in 2002. Congo saw an increase in its literacy rate for the same period from 67.1 percent to 82.8 percent. The rates for Uganda, Kenya, Yemen, and Nigeria are 56.1 percent and 68.9 percent, 70.8 percent and 84.3 percent, 32.7 percent and 49.0 percent, and 48.7 percent and 68.8 percent respectively. If one examines the breakdown by region, the least developed countries as a group saw an increase in their adult literacy rates from 43.0 percent to 52.5 percent, the Arab states from 50.8 percent to 63.3 percent, South Asia from 47.0 percent to 57.6 percent, Sub-Saharan Africa from 50.8 percent to 63.2 percent and East Asia and the Pacific from 79.8 percent to 90.3 percent. If we look at the increase in the levels of literacy from the perspective of medium human development and low human development, the figures are 71.8 percent and 80.4 percent, and 42.5 percent and 54.3 percent, respectively.

From the brief summary of statistics presented above, it is clear that less progress has been made in increasing literacy levels in the South Asia region relative to the other areas mentioned. India is a major player in South Asia having the largest economy and most of the population. The country has also made important advances in raising its literacy levels since Independence, but owing to its large population much remains to be accomplished as large numbers of Indians are still unable to read and write.

In the past a number of programmes had been introduced to tackle the problem of illiteracy. More recently, a Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) was begun in 1988 to help raise literacy levels. This book evaluates that programme. The impact of the TLC is examined in detail in six districts of the country situated in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Jharkhand, and Rajasthan. The methodology followed in evaluating the total literacy campaign in the six districts is based on the use of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The latter is a group interview where upto 12 people participate in a discussion. Their experiences may be similar but it is not necessary that it is the case always. Furthermore, they may not be known to each other, but what is important is the interaction of this group with the interviewer as well as amongst themselves. Focus group discussions are useful in that they generate data and, most importantly, are accessible to people who are not literate.

The editor's overview summarises the philosophical, cultural, and social milieu in which the total literacy campaign was undertaken. The editor highlights the existence of two cultures—one based on oral traditions spanning centuries, and the other more recent and modernistic in its outlook, as well as more materialistic in its content. Here, the acquisition of literacy is treated like a good—a fundamental good such as water and food. The interactions of these two cultures determine the success or otherwise of the total literacy campaign, which is examined in detail in the six studies presented in the book. Culture also plays an important role as Indian society is multicultural and literacy may be interpreted in a manner that signifies different meanings against different cultural backgrounds. While conventional literacy, that is, the ability to read and write, may find favour in some cultures, others may not give it much importance, relying on non-conventional means for the transference of knowledge.

The overview also discusses the various concepts and definitions of literacy—from the very narrow that highlight reading and writing capability to the broader view which treats literacy as an on-going process that affects every facet of individual behaviour throughout the person's life. In short, the overview is a must read as it succinctly summarises developments relating to literacy, both theoretical and practical, over the past couple of decades.

The success or failure of such programmes in general, and of the total literacy campaign in India, depends on a number of factors identified in the six case studies. The more important ones include the issue of incentives, commitment, and motivation. Ancillary factors, such as effective participation of the population, also play a significant role in whether programmes succeed or not. The absence of such factors would result in a failure of a programme/plan/project no matter how well-conceived. In Pakistan, plans to improve adult literacy often foundered because of a lack of commitment in terms of resources as well as the will or motivation to succeed. As a consequence, adult illiteracy in Pakistan has become an issue of major social concern, causing economic losses that are immense.

To conclude, the book presents useful case studies on increasing literacy rates with lessons to be learnt by other developing countries. These lessons, however, need to be adapted to suite their own peculiar circumstances and conditions. Like the "Foreword/Overview", the "Afterword" is also a good basis for further research. Overall, the book is easy to follow. The narrative flows smoothly, amply supported by numerous tables and boxes highlighting the issues discussed in the text. The methodologies followed are interesting and could be adapted for use elsewhere.

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REFERENCE

UNDP (2004) *Human Development Report 2004*. New York: Oxford University Press.