Education, literacy and women's empowerment[1]

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Let me begin at the dawn of Independent India when we had hope and confidence in the future, in our own people and in our system to emerge from darkness to light. Across the border China was doing wonders in the field of education – which was hailed as the great equaliser, the hope of China. Within a very short span China announced that almost every single child was in school. Our constitution also identified education as the right of every child, but large dams and massive public sector projects were hailed as the temples of modern India. Education, primary and adult education did not capture the imagination of our leaders. We continued with the system that the British left behind. Our leaders believed that as the nation "develops", education would automatically happen and women will also march hand in hand with men. Yes, we invested considerable amount of our precious resources on elementary education and a lot more on higher and technical education. This was no doubt a valuable investment, however the reality was that literacy and education for adults was not a national priority – even though several education commissions – starting with the Kothari commission of the mid-seventies called for eradication of illiteracy.

Right up to the 1970s, while we made tremendous progress in higher education, technical education and established a number of universities, a significant proportion of children in most states did not have access to primary education. Among them were children from disadvantaged communities, rural and remote areas. Girls constituted an overwhelming proportion of out of school children. The army of illiterate adults continued to grow – we could not shut the tap as China had done. While a range of small functional and adult literacy programmes were initiated, it was not until the mid-1970s that Government of India launched the National Adult Education Programme. This was done as a part of a global movement where adult literacy had come to be accepted as a political activity. Education for social justice and equality was the new slogan. The emergent voluntary sector was entrusted with this important agenda. While many genuine groups inspired by Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich did remarkable work in participatory learning, many other opportunists jumped at it in order to access readily available funds. Unfortunately within six or seven years of launching NAEP, the programme got discredited.

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At the same time, the emerging women's movement drew our attention to the real situation of women – dowry deaths, violence, unequal wages, illiteracy and a host of gender issues. The GOI report on the status of women shocked us. But, despite compelling evidence about the mutually reinforcing relationship between women's education and women's status – the women's movement did not really take up the issue of women's literacy or primary education.

The National Literacy Mission was established in 1988. There were some spectacular successes. Kottayam City in Kerala was made fully literate in 100 days in April-June 1989. Ernakulam District also in Kerala was made fully literate in one year January-December 1989. There was no turning back and the government withdrew NAEP and moved full steam into a mission mode to 'eradicate illiteracy' in 1990. Initial scepticism gave way to euphoria in 1990-92 and the Literacy Mission forged ahead

Like the NAEP, voluntary organisations, social action groups and village-based social animators were the mainstay of the literacy campaign – but with a difference. Having learnt a bitter lesson from the erstwhile NAEP programme, the literacy mission (popularly known as TLC) was positioned as a time bound campaign involving a wide range of actors as 'partners' in social mobilisation. Starting with an ambitious plan to mop up all illiterates in the 6-60 age group the literacy mission gradually narrowed its focus to the 15-35 age group.

While the entire movement was constructed in gender-neutral framework, the government was surprised to note that women came out in large numbers making the movement a potential force for women's empowerment. This realisation gave the movement a boost. Somewhere along the way organisations and people working with women realised the tremendous potential of literacy campaigns for women's mobilisation. We will return to this at a later stage, but at this point it is sufficient to say that the unexpected spin-offs of the literacy movement emerged as its greatest validation. In an otherwise bleak scenario, this aspect of the literacy campaign reopened the debate on education as a tool for women's empowerment and equality. Even the BGVS – a creative offshoot of the communist movement in Kerala – grudgingly acknowledged 'gender' as a significant variable in mobilisation for literacy. The women's movement, which had hitherto had an ambiguous stand on adult education and literacy, took note of unprecedented mobilisation of women in Puddukottai in Tamil Nadu and Nellore in Andhra Pradesh.

Nellore, a coastal district of Andhra Pradesh was witness to one of the most spectacular campaigns. The initial social mobilisation for literacy in 1991 was successful and many women came forward to participate in literacy classes. One seemingly unimportant chapter described the effect of alcoholism on the family and the efforts in some parts of the country to fight against alcoholism. Maybe the time was just right or maybe the women of Nellore were quite fed up with the havoc alcohol has created in their lives. This provided a trigger. Within no time thousands of women came out of their homes. The 'anti-*arrack*'[2] movement was born in 1992. District officials involved in the literacy campaign were not only sympathetic to the movement but actually encouraged them and praised their courage. This movement picked up momentum and the Government of Andhra Pradesh declared the state an alcohol-free area in April 1993 – i.e. declared prohibition. Changing government policy was a heady experience and during one of the victory celebrations women discovered the magic formula of self-help groups. The savings movement was thus born and in almost a record time of two years almost 6,000 savings groups called 'Podupulakshmi' came up. While women were savouring their newfound strength and the meaning of power as a positive force for social transformation, the government decided to create a Women's Bank. Women who were now used to handling their own money and who had experienced the power of decentralised decision-making were reluctant to hand over their savings to an impersonal banking system. This vibrant movement gradually faded away from public eye.

Puddukottai, an impoverished District in Tamil Nadu was in the spotlight for yet another innovative literacy movement. The campaign led to unprecedented mobilisation of rural women in 1992 – almost the same period of the anti-liquor movement of Nellore. The symbol of power adopted by women in this area was cycling. Thousands of women learnt to ride the bicycle. Acquiring literacy skills alongside the means for greater mobility was the distinguishing feature of this unique campaign.

Women of Nellore and Puddukottai may not have mastered literacy skills, but the literacy campaign changed their lives. As Avik Ghosh succinctly observes:

> The classic, and now legendary, powerful anti-*arrack* movement launched by rural women in Nellore district became possible because the literacy centres provided a forum for women to meet, share experiences and discuss issues… While it was never NLM's intention to create confrontation between people and the administration, the facilitative factors of a volunteer-based and loosely structured programme provided the space for people to think and act freely. The district

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[2] *Arrack* is a local alcohol that is brewed and sold locally.

officials and the literacy workers, on their part, facilitated and provided positive support to their cause… Technical achievements of 'literacy competencies' may or may not have been exceptionally high in Nellore but it did not matter so much. The TLC provided, for the first time on such a large scale, a forum for participation and dialogue, discussion, learning and sharing among volunteers (agents of change) and learners (those desirous of change). (Avik Ghosh, 1997)

It has to be recognised that such large-scale campaigns do infuse dynamism and the will to change. This was more than demonstrated in some Districts. Literacy and the associated practice of group discussion, experience sharing, access to information, collective action generates its own momentum. Evaluation reports and travel notes of those who visited the TLC districts show that traditionally disadvantaged groups like scheduled caste people and those from scheduled tribes participated in large numbers. Women jumped into it with great enthusiasm. Unfortunately, the campaign planners and administrators belied their hopes. Literacy classes could not be sustained and community-based continuing education programmes were not initiated. Shoddy planning, administrative red tape and the unfortunate lack of continuity in the policies and practices of officers – led to the demise of an otherwise exciting process. The recent studies done in Birbhum, Bilaspur and Dumka Districts has confirmed our fears. Not much literacy happened – but wherever the campaign showed promise, it led to a greater demand for primary education for children. People began to appreciate the value of education.

Notwithstanding some spectacular success stories, the literacy mission lost its zest in 1993. The unfortunate culture of 'undo what my predecessor did' affected this campaign too. The political climate was also uncertain and caste and communal conflicts increased. The momentum gained in 1989-92 was lost. There was also a realisation that many districts were floundering and the campaign did not make the desired impact. Therefore the government launched 'Operation Restoration' in 1994. Twenty-five districts, mostly from the 'resistant' states were selected (with the exception of Karnataka where Bijapur, Kolar and Bangalore were chosen). It is difficult to make any categorical statement on the success of Operation Restoration, but existing evidence, however anecdotal and patchy, does not speak of any spectacular turnaround.

The literacy mission was not a complete blank. It showed to the world that given the right environment and the right stimulus the state machinery could be galvanised into creative action. It also demonstrated beyond doubt that people were not apathetic to education and learning. Beyond a particular stage in life they may find literacy skills difficult to memorise and retain, but enthusiasm for learning and acquiring knowledge was tremendous. Women participated in large numbers, not because they wanted to

learn the 3 Rs, but because it opened a window to the world outside. It created an invigorating environment for accessing information and finding out about the larger world. It also brought home the point that literacy is but a sub-set of education. Women may not have learnt to read and write, but they certainly learnt to think, introspect, speak their mind and come together.

A recent study (Centre for Media Studies, 1998) has generated interesting information on the impact of the Total Literacy Campaign in the lives of poor women. Three districts, Bilaspur (Madhya Pradesh), Birbhum (West Bengal) and Dumka (Bihar) were selected for in depth qualitative study. The study reveals the following impact:

- Parents from poor illiterate families have developed a positive attitude towards the education of boys and girls. Twenty-eight per cent neo-literate parents interact with teachers of their children as compared to below 10 per cent of non-literate parents. School enrolment and retention is significantly higher in neo-literate households.
- Overwhelming difference recorded in knowledge levels and attitude towards minimum age of marriage, problems (including health) of early marriage, spacing and contraception, institutional deliveries/delivery by trained person, oral rehydration salts and diarrhoea control and importance of using safe drinking water. However, no perceptible change was recorded in immunisation levels, household sanitation.
- Enhanced income recorded in the three districts where functional literacy and skill improvement were part of the literacy programme. This increase is also attributed to greater self-esteem and self confidence of neo-literate people, increased mobility and also easier interaction with different institutions including banks and district administration.
- The study did not record any significant increase in political participation or voter turnout.
- Majority of neo-literate women (51 per cent) reported that their status in the family had improved, they now jointly decide on economic matters (13 per cent said they decided on their own!) and many of them said that participation in the literacy programme opened several opportunities.
- An overwhelming majority of Scheduled Caste learners (94 per cent) reported acquisition of some vocational skill after participating in the literacy programme. Almost 16 per cent reported receiving institutional credit. In comparison 41 per cent of Scheduled Tribe learners reported acquisition of skills and 10 per cent reported availing institutional credit.

Notwithstanding noteworthy achievements, the TLC is a saga of missed opportunities. Lets take the legendary Nellore or the spectacular Puddukottai campaigns discussed in the earlier section of this paper. In a very short span of time, thousands of women came together. Poor rural women got a glimpse of a New World. In Nellore the literacy campaign sparked off a anti-*arrack* (anti-liquor) movement. Women came out of their homes, made alliances, worked closely with the administration and tried, albeit short-lived, to change government policy. This created greater awareness about social issues and encouraged the women to think strategically. The anti-liquor movement gradually gave way to savings movement. Women formed groups to pool their savings, rotate them for consumption and production loans. It was estimated in April 1995 that there were 6,600 groups, bringing together 204,000 women. They had mobilised Rs 6 Crores[3] through their savings groups and accessed Rs 3.75 Crores through IRDP (Integrated Rural Development Programme) and DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas). There was tremendous enthusiasm and the Government of Andhra Pradesh was euphoric. It was the greatest success story of the decade. There was a move to initiate a movement called 'People's health in people's hands'. The environment could not have been more favourable.

What happened next? Here were thousands of women's groups consisting of barely literate women engaged in savings. Here was a golden opportunity for meaningful continuing education. A ready and eager village-level institutional base to encourage life-long learning was not galvanised. The government saw this as an opportunity to build a women's bank. Here were thousands of women's groups who were empowered through their savings groups. The government's plan did not appeal to them. Having just realised the power of collective functioning and collective decision-making, they did not respond kindly to government's efforts to centralise their savings and issue pass books, with effective control transferred to bank employees and other middlemen. They were apprehensive about losing control over their own money. Centralisation of a people's movement proved disastrous. The movement lost its momentum. A historic opportunity to use education as a tool for genuine empowerment and consolidation of people's power and initiative was lost.

Yes, women of Nellore are definitely richer by way of experience. The confidence they gained through the literacy campaign, anti-*arrack* movement and the savings movement is still with them. But they have lost their collective strength. There is an element of tragedy in the Nellore story – education could have made a difference, but that was not to be. Women

[3] Rs 1 Crore is equal to 10,000,000 Rupees.

in Puddukottai narrate similar experiences. Cycling was just a symbol of mobility and empowerment. It was not an end in itself. However the administrators involved in this campaign moved on after initiating and nurturing these spectacular road shows. The women of Nellore and Puddukottai were left behind.

Why were we not able to convert these wonderful experiences into opportunities for life-long learning? Where did we go wrong? Talking to a wide range of actors involved at different stages of the literacy campaign it became apparent that there was no strategic thinking. District Collectors, like most career civil servants, have a short horizon. They like to leap into prominence like shooting starts, make a splash and move on. The pain-staking process of nurturing a movement, helping ordinary people consolidate their new found identity and strength and build sustainable organisational structures – are alien to the civil service. The bane of India's development administration is that each administrator does not think beyond his own tenure. They operate in a three to five year frame. The administrative culture does not encourage building on the achievements of predecessors. In the last thirty-odd years the tendency of negating the contributions of predecessors has taken root in administrative services. Institutional memory is short and each new incumbent concentrates on building his or her career. Given the short tenure of each incumbent administrator and elected representative – there is no compelling reason to do long-term planning. There is another reason too. The literacy campaign was launched and justified as a 'quick' movement, a magic formula to 'eradicate' illiteracy. It was never conceived as a spark that would ignite a movement for life long learning. It was a quick-fix technology mission.

Where was the women's movement? Could they not consolidate and build on the strengths of such powerful movements?

India took a heroic stand in the Bucharest Population Conference where Dr Karan Singh declared 'development is the best contraceptive'. Back home we were plunged into the emergency and the main slogan of Mrs Gandhi was population control. The government went hammer and tongs after men. The vasectomy nightmare is said to have reversed Mrs Gandhi's fortunes in 1977. By the late seventies the blame shifted on women who were seen as producing too many children – leading to a women-centred programme. Sterilisation of women was the magic formula. By the end of the seventies the climate changed dramatically. Targeting men proved politically expensive. By the end of the decade women became the targets of population control. 'Female sterilisation, which accounted for 45 per cent of all sterilisations in 1975-76 fell to only 25 per cent in 1976-77, rose

to 80 per cent in 1977-78. Throughout the 1980s they accounted for about 85 per cent of all sterilisations, and in 1989-90, 91.8 per cent' (Sundari Ravindran, 1995).

Given the prevailing situation, the women's movement was pushed into a reactive mode. Battling against social evils and against government's own policies left little room for proactive agenda setting. The movement demanded non-discriminatory policies and programmes. The women's movement got a renewed burst of energy with the publication of 'Towards Equality – Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India' (1975) The international women's decade (1975-85) created a favourable global and national climate for change. Mobilisation against social evils like dowry, ensuring the visibility of women's work, income generation, formation of women's collectives and groups gave the voluntary sector a shot in the arm. Many women's organisations were set up across the country and universities and colleges set up women's development centres. For the first time since India became Independent, the women's movement got energised to fight for equality. Case studies, data and other research based information on women's participation in development; their invisibility and inherent inequality were debated eagerly.

Unfortunately, women's struggle for equality did not include a well-articulated and vocal demand for literacy for poor illiterate women. In fact, the women's movement has had an ambiguous relationship with literacy and education. While the importance of education was acknowledged and equal access was an issue especially among the educated middle-class; the relevance of literacy in poor women's struggle for survival with dignity was somehow relegated into the background. Some leading women activists argued that 'illiteracy' is not a symbol of ignorance and making literacy a value in itself only ended up devaluing the traditional knowledge and wisdom of women. While no one consciously undervalued the importance of education per se, literacy was not seen as being important in itself. Collectivisation, confidence building, organisation building and leadership development – such issues were debated. Organisations working with poor urban and rural women lay greater emphasis on women's mobilisation. During this period the reputation of the National Adult Education Programme had reached an all-time low – this further alienated the women's movement from literacy programmes. In short, literacy and education for poor women did not capture the imagination of the women's movement. This is succinctly captured in the statement of an illiterate woman from Gujarat:

If I learn to read and write, will my wages increase from the next day? Will water come to my doorstep? Will my husband stop drinking and harassing me? Will I get a government job? No, everything will still be the same! So why should I spend the evenings with a slate and chalk, when I am exhausted with the day's work, when my whole body is aching and my mind is numb? First show me to solve my problems, then I'll gladly learn to read and write! (Quoted by Srilatha Batliwala, March 1994)

In the last two decades and especially since the Cairo conference, governments across the world have declared that education of women is the key to fertility control. The population control philosophy has now given way to a theory of long-term population stabilisation. Women's literacy is seen as the key. As a result, Government of India and the donors supporting the population programme are today talking about the relationship between literacy, fertility and women's autonomy. It is argued that a few years of schooling or adult literacy programmes can change fertility behaviour. Ensuring girls go to school, education programmes for adolescents and women's literacy are today accepted as a three-pronged strategy to contain population growth. This has infused new life into the campaign for women's education.

A wide range of variables determine women's autonomy and their position in society. Studies done in different parts of the country seem to show a broad correlation between women's position and fertility. However, innumerable studies have also shown that other factors like declining maternal and child mortality, access to reliable health care facilities, confidence over the survival of children, access to contraception and five to eight years of schooling leading to delay in the age of marriage exert a strong influence on family size – even in situations where women are not empowered or enjoy a good status in society. This has encouraged some demographers and policy makers to argue that women's empowerment is a desirable long-term goal, but in the short run improving the quality of primary health care and enhancing the basket of contraceptives (especially for spacing) would turn the tide. Kerala and Tamil Nadu are cited as examples of successful demographic transition without conscious efforts towards women's empowerment.

The 'next-best' policy intervention for the government is to promote women's education, employment, income generation, credit and saving and so on. Almost all such interventions in the above areas are justified on the expected impact on fertility, infant and child mortality and morbidity and maternal mortality rates. Despite recognition of the complexities of the situation, almost all government schemes continue to target women as perpetuators of the population problem. Women are still viewed as

autonomous agents. Little effort is made to address male responsibility and male involvement in child survival, domestic work, reproduction, girls' education and so on. Women's involvement is seen as the key to improving access to water and sanitation, household income, primary education, family health – the list is endless. Women as hand-pump mechanics, primary school teachers, women's self-help groups, women's literacy – these are the magic bullets of today. There is an alarming increase in the burden of work and responsibility of women in all economic and social sector programmes.

Whether such interventions ultimately improve women's position within the family is an open question. Creating opportunities for income generation without initiating processes that help women gain greater control over the income they earn has been found counterproductive. Similarly, involving groups of women in thrift and credit groups without building their capabilities to understand, manage and control the process can become a disempowering experience. There have been instances where middlemen (including NGOs) manage group funds, including maintaining passbooks and registers. Similarly, literacy drives which mechanically transfer reading skills have been shown to have little impact on the overall development of women. Urban areas are full of cases where young office going women hand over their entire income to their husband or mother-in-law and continue to be as oppressed and exploited as their illiterate sisters. 'Kerosene Stove Accidents' have almost become synonymous with burning young women for dowry-related demands. In the last twenty years, there is a realisation that isolated interventions – be it in education, income generation or collectivisation – have little impact. Similarly, we have also realised that women's access to productive assets needs to be supported through legal rights to property and ownership of land. The much publicised 30 per cent reservation for women in *panchayats* (local governments) will have little impact unless serious efforts are made to correct centuries of subordination through well planned strategies to enhance women's status within the household.

What are the components of women's autonomy? Women's organisations, social activists, administrators and other concerned citizens working among women have tried to spell it out. Autonomy is determined by the following:

- Women's position within the family and in society determine her sense of self, confidence and self-esteem;
- Access to resources – economic (income, employment), material (productive assets like land, credit, finance); intellectual (education, knowledge, information);

- Control over her own labour – her ability to determine how she uses her time, demand payment, have control over her income and make her contribution visible;
- Control over her body – ability to decide when she gets married, with whom, how many children and the desired spacing;
- Availability of reliable health care facilities and safe contraception;
- Mobility and ability to move beyond her immediate environment for accessing income, knowledge and self-confidence;
- Personal laws which determine her rights within the family – especially those relating to marriage, divorce, maintenance, inheritance, share of family assets and so on;
- Opportunity to come together as a collective to realise and assert power as a group to:
  - Fight for their rights and demand their entitlement,
  - Question dominant ideology that justifies subordination in the name of religion, culture and status reproduction;
  - Transform existing institutions and gendered spaces in society; and
  - Mechanisms to deal with daily loss of dignity through domestic and societal violence – including violation of women's human rights in the name of family planning – lack of real choice in contraceptives, unethical trials of new technologies and systematic effort to reduce women to reproductive machines.

Women's autonomy and empowerment is not a simple linear process. The question before was: can education play a critical role in bringing about this transformation? Experience of numerous programmes in the government and the NGO sector shows that this is indeed possible. Education, if understood in a broad sense, essentially involves opening the minds, enhancing self-esteem and self-confidence, building a sense of positive self-worth, accessing information and tools of knowledge and acquiring the ability to negotiate this unequal and unjust world from a position of strength. Education, seen in this light, goes beyond literacy and schooling.

Can literacy be a vehicle for the attainment of other development goals, namely, improvement in the quality of life of poor women, enhanced income, control over income, access to information and the tools of knowledge to negotiate a hostile environment? Linking education to survival issues of the poor, especially women, has remained a challenge. Women's organisations and social activists engaged in 'hard core' development were actually educating women, even though literacy was not a necessary input. Women's struggles to gain legitimate access to forest produce, common property resources, credit, skill-training, employment –

all these were seen by these activists as 'education'. Yet, literacy remained on the backburner.

The eighties and the nineties brought with it yet another daunting challenge. Expansion of the market economy, industrialisation and globalisation increased inequalities. Loss of livelihoods, erosion of natural resources and with it decreased women's access to water, fuel, fodder and traditional survival resources. It also brought new forms of exploitation – displacement, tourism, sex trade, retrenchment and so on. Women were being pushed into less productive sectors. Increased pressure on rural resources accelerated migration to urban areas in search of livelihood. People from backward regions, tribal communities, disadvantaged castes and the displaced communities were being pushed against the wall. Women in such communities shouldered the brunt and this phenomenon was labelled 'feminisation of poverty'. What were the implications for poor women?

In the last five to six years organisations and people working with poor women have tried to link education and survival. It is argued that literacy per se means little to poor women unless it is leads to perceptible change in the lives of the poor. Let us now look back on Mahila Samakhya that was formulated in 1987-88 as an effort to operationalise a bold new policy statement. What has this programme achieved in 10 years?

- Recent evaluations and reports show that the programme today reaches out to poor rural women in 2,500 villages in the UP, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and 1300 in Bihar (status as of July 1997). It is far less than what was anticipated in 1988. Formation and sustaining of women's groups in the villages covered has not been easy. In some areas women leaders have emerged, but groups have not been consolidated. There is no uniform 'model' and open-ended guidelines of the project were interpreted differently in different regions. For example Andhra Pradesh does not have any paid worker at the village level, and all the 252 villages covered so far have functioning women's groups.
- These women's groups or informal gatherings around rural women leaders is the fulcrum around which the programme revolves. Information, real-life education, demand articulation, monitoring schools and other government services, struggles – all these happen at this level.
- Education is happening and it still retains the thrust of the conceptual framework of the programme. Acquiring self confidence, being able to deal with authority, knowledge of one's body and health issues, feeling more in command of one's situation (shedding helplessness) and some

reading and writing – 'education, viewed in this light, permeates all of the MS programme' (Jain & Krishnamurty, 1996). Mahila Samakhya has empowered women along the line, especially grassroots facilitators, women leaders and functionaries.

- In the last five years, education of children, adolescent girls and women's literacy have intensified. Where feasible, the programme has plugged into the Literacy Campaign. But the experience of the programme with women's literacy has been mixed. In some areas like Sabarkanta in Gujarat literacy for women was taken up at an early stage. But in most other areas, women have come to appreciate the relevance of literacy and education, especially for their daughters. One can say with confidence that the programme has created a positive environment for education and learning.
- Mahila Shikshan Kendra (Women's Education Centres) – residential condensed programmes for out-of-school girls and for dropouts have been a major success in the last five years. Adolescent girls, young women and women leaders have responded to this with enthusiasm. Despite increasing demand the programme has not been able to create more residential centres, and this has been acknowledged as a problem area. Recent evaluation reports point to the lack of sustained educational resource support for development of curriculum, teaching and learning material and training support. Nirantar – a Delhi-based education resource group provides intensive back-up support to the programme in Banda. Similar support organisations do not exist everywhere.
- Mahila Samakhya has mobilised women to send their daughters to school and this is acknowledged as a very significant outcome. Non-formal education centres special coaching classes for girls and educational fairs for children – these are cited as highlights of the programme.
- One of the major outcomes is women's participation in local self-government institutions. Many women leaders across the country contested *Panchayat* elections and emerged successful.

There is a realisation that mobilisation and collectivisation processes alone cannot sustain a programme. In the early years creating space for women to come together and talk, share experiences and reach out to each other was important. However, after some time, it degenerate into a mechanical process that cease to capture the imagination of women and the social activists employed for this purpose. This happened in Rajasthan Women's Development Programme and this is also evident in Mahila Samakhya. Such processes can be sustained over a long period only if the programme retains its dynamism. Women's groups and organisations grow with

experience and confidence. They take on new issues and gain greater knowledge and experience. There are groups in the NGO sector that have moved from food security (grain banks) to watershed development, to trading in forest produce, literacy and so on. As they gain in confidence and experience they take on bigger challenges – even challenging government policies and programmes. Encouraging this process of organic growth is essential to retain dynamism. Being a programme in the education sector, and given the inherent limitations of a government project – this process of growth was stunted. Maybe it would have been better if the project mobilised women of an area and moved on to new areas.

Despite being an education sector programme – Mahila Samakhya has not made an impact on that score. Even after nine years the programme has little to show by way of effective literacy and basic educational intervention for women. In the last five years Mahila Shikshan Kendra – time-bound residential condensed education programme for adolescent girls and women has caught on. Even in this case, there have been few pockets of success. Despite growing demand Mahila Samakhya has not been able to respond adequately. Pedagogic and educational support required is intensive and there are few resource agencies that have the capability to support curriculum development, teacher training and continuous educational inputs. May be a more focused and well-articulated strategy is needed to take this up as a priority issue.

It is said that in almost all the Mahila Samakhya areas enrolment of girls has gone up and women take keen interest in the functioning of the primary school. This, like the Literacy Campaign, is a positive achievement. Unfortunately girls' education has not been taken up on a priority basis. Probably this is because the programme was positioned as a women's empowerment initiative. This has been noted with concern in evaluation reports.

Literacy for adult women has just not taken off. Barring pockets of innovations, the painstaking process of developing primers, identifying and training teachers and running literacy classes, camps or informal literacy circles – have not been taken up on a priority basis. May be, here again, the problem revolves around pedagogic and resource support. Being a women's empowerment programme – the expertise and skills needed to run a serious literacy programme are not available within the project. The project's ability to each out to resource institutions seems to be limited.

Where Mahila Samakhya did link up with the Literacy Campaign, there is little evidence of the process being sustained. The programme does have

the scope to set up rural libraries and reading rooms. But – this has not happened. Dwelling on the reasons for such glaring lacunae, one can perhaps say that education seen in formal terms of literacy continues to be undervalued. Or perhaps, given the choice project functionaries would rather not get into cumbersome processes required for literacy and basic education. As they are more familiar with women's mobilisation, literacy and basic education continues to be neglected.

In short, what is needed today is a fresh strategy development process that forces project functionaries to look back at the achievements, the problems and the bottlenecks of the last nine years. A fresh exercise in project reformulation is perhaps the only answer.

The programme is at a crossroads. There is a great deal of pressure to intensify education and literacy activities – the government is not the only champion of this demand. Educational workers involved with the programme feel that the time is ripe to give education and literacy a big push. There is also considerable pressure from women themselves to step up economic activities, pay greater attention to skill-training and capacity-building. There is also a growing feeling that rural women's groups should form independent federations in the district and the project should move into new areas. Many well-wishers feel that the programme should be rescued from inevitable bureaucratisation and degeneration. They cite the example of Women's Development Programme of Rajasthan, which has effectively withered away, and what remains today is a bureaucratic skeleton of a once vibrant movement.

One of the vocal criticisms heard about the Mahila Samakhya Programme is that women's literacy was not pursued as a legitimate goal of the project. In the early years this was often countered rather aggressively using the 'address constraints' argument.[4] Many people involved in the programme felt that women would invariably reach out to literacy when they saw its relevance in their daily battle for survival. While some literacy camps were organised and residential condensed courses were set up in some pockets, the mainstay of the programme continues to be women's mobilisation to enhance their individual and collective strength. Training programmes, information fairs (*Mela*), study tours, herbal gardens, struggle to access development programmes, monitoring the work of service providers in other government programmes and so on constituted the bulk of project activities. This, it was

[4] As spelt out in the section on Mahila Samakhya, one of the arguments put forth was that unless we address the constraints that prevent women and girls from accessing education, it will not be possible to encourage women to reach out to literacy or get girls to schools.

argued, was 'real life education'. However as the project consolidated, it settled into a predicable pattern. Mahila Shikshan Kendra (residential condensed education programme) catered to adolescent girls and to some young women. Women trained as hand-pump mechanics were more enthusiastic about becoming literate. Young women leaders also sought out literacy. But the bulk of poor women did not demand literacy.

Some project functionaries argued that the programme should focus on young women and adolescent girls. There was a vocal section that wanted to reach out to girl children. Others argued that the training programmes and workshops reinforced the prejudices of the trainers and facilitators who were not convinced about the intrinsic value of literacy. This critique dates back to the 1980s when many vocal leaders of the women's movement argued that 'illiteracy' cannot be seen as a handicap – as poor women have rich experiential knowledge. As most of the trainers were drawn from women's organisations and feminist groups, it was not surprising that the signals sent down the line did not encourage literacy. Some others wanted to link up with the literacy campaign, but given patchy success, this was not always easy. The programme took a predictable trajectory. Like the Women's Development Programme of Rajasthan, awareness and mobilisation strategies have been effective up to a point. There is a realisation that this cannot go on endlessly. Therefore, many workers want to initiate thrift and credit groups. Others want to introduce economic programmes and income-generating activities. Most of them feel compelled to respond to the opportunities created by the *Panchayati Raj* legislation giving rural women one-third reservation in local government bodies. All the actors agree that the above activities are not mutually exclusive. Given the work pressure, they have to prioritise – and this invariably pushes literacy down the list of 'immediate' activities.

So where do we stand? While many organisations and programme working with poor women acknowledge the relevance of literacy in women's struggle for equality, organising literacy classes is not easy. There have been creative pockets where literacy and education went hand in hand, but such experiences are few and far between. The most successful interventions are the residential programmes where adolescent girls and women enrol for a time-bound programme for literacy and basic education.

Yes, literacy and numeracy are important, but they become meaningful when women take the initiative. The lesson we can draw from the experience of Mahila Samakhya is that literacy cannot happen automatically. Grassroots organisations need to be supported to initiate educational activities, and educational resource groups like Nirantar can make this happen. The literacy campaigns, especially the shooting stars that showed

so much promise have demonstrated that quick campaigns can, at best, create an environment for empowerment and learning. They fade away as quickly as they shoot into prominence. Linking education and literacy to ongoing struggles of women and creating opportunities for women and girls to acquire these skills is the need of the hour.

Sustaining life long learning requires painstaking work over a long period – at least till such time as we create structures that can become self-sustaining. Ultimately, universal primary education coupled with avenues for continuing education for adults is the answer. Creating systems for effective participation of the poor and the disempowered in democratic processes can strengthen civil society. Governments, NGOs and community-based organisations can only act as catalysts by systematically addressing the constraints that prevent the poor, especially women, from accessing tools of knowledge. And education is a powerful tool to enhance the capacities of ordinary citizens of the country to negotiate this unequal world from a position of strength.

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