A Report on Adult Literacy and Education in India
by Karla Kevin

What is Adult Education?

The Government of India’s Ministry of Human Resource Development defines Adult Education as that which “aims at extending educational options to those adults, who have lost the opportunity and have crossed the age of formal education, but now feel a need for learning of any type, including, basic education (literacy), skill development (vocational education) and equivalency.”

Adult education is a key requirement in developing countries that still struggle with issues such as poverty, burgeoning populations and poor infrastructure. In India, while the Government has made considerable efforts in the area of adult education, including incorporating ambitious targets in the Five Year Plans, the quantum of actual progress falls significantly short of the level required to achieve a respectable national literacy rate, more so when it comes to literacy among Indian women. Sensing the need in this area, several NGOs and public-private partnerships have emerged to contribute to the cause of improving literacy rates. As a boon to the promotion of literacy among women in India, the Government in 2009 announced that literacy would be its key programme instrument for emancipation and empowerment of women, and this would be done through focussed efforts by the National Literacy Mission (NLM).

The NLM has now taken steps to strengthen its partnership with NGOs for furtherance of the cause of literacy and adult education.

What do the statistics say?

Adult Illiteracy

The 2001 India Census pegged adult illiteracy at an astounding 34%, i.e. one-third of the total population over the age of 15, on an average. There is a notable disparity among men and women in the country: adult non-literate being 23.3% among males and 45.1% among females (almost double).

Compare this to two other countries in the region: China and Indonesia, both having established their governments, as they stand today, around the same time as India¹. A study showed that while all three countries had astronomically high illiteracy rates in the 40’s and 50’s (80-90%), China and Indonesia have made rapid progress, with their 2001 illiteracy rates brought below 10%, significantly lower than India’s 34%. Comparing the efforts between the three countries, the study observed that, “India in no case was lagging behind in terms of formulating policies in this regard, but the greatest lacuna was witnessed in implementation of policy and planning.”

¹: China in 1949, overcoming imperial rule, Japanese occupation and civil war; Indonesia in 1945, declaring independence from the Dutch and Japanese.
The findings of the 2011 Census show only a modest improvement: the overall illiteracy rate has dropped to 26% - around 18% among males and 34% among females. Illiteracy, therefore, still remains a concern for India, especially when it comes to closing the gap between the rates for males and females.

Additional perspective on the literacy rates

In terms of level of education, the 2011 Census indicates that out of all literates in the country, 56% are only till the primary level education, and an additional 16% and 14% are educated till the middle school or secondary school level respectively. This means that only a meagre 14% have received an education above secondary school level.

So, while the literacy rates are showing improvement, the progress in terms of meaningful development of the human resources of the country does not look so promising.

Understanding adult illiteracy in the global context

The United Nations’ “Education for All - Global Monitoring Report (2010)” declared India as the country with the highest number of illiterate adults.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) estimates the illiteracy rate among adults (over 15 years of age) in South and West Asia to be around 38% currently, and is projected to drop to around 27% by 2015. This level of illiteracy is at the same level as Sub-Saharan Africa, and is significantly lower than all other regions in the world. Two-thirds of these illiterates are women.

India is slightly better in terms of adult illiteracy rates, but owing to the size of the population, still leads by a huge margin when it comes to absolute number of illiterate adults: India has about 287-300 million illiterate adults, way ahead of the next two countries on the list - China with 62 million and Pakistan with 50 million illiterate adults (UIS, 2012). In fact, India’s illiterate adults form about 57-60% of the illiterate adult population of the Asia Pacific region (507 million). This is cause for alarm and a call to action.

In India, like any other place, illiteracy is a function of poverty, with the concentration of illiterate adults being found in rural areas. Certain religious minorities and scheduled castes and tribes have much higher levels of adult illiteracy, again especially among women. Illiterate adults struggle with unemployment, or are relegated to degrading jobs, oppressed by employers and moneylenders, thus being further sucked into the vortex of poverty and exploitation.

UNESCO’s Education For All (EFA) targets aim to bring down the number of adult illiterates in India to about 135 million by 2015. This will still be around 53% of the 253 million illiterate adults projected for the Asia Pacific region in that time frame, but is nevertheless, a very ambitious target to achieve.
Organisations working for Adult Education

Government

1) The National Literacy Mission (NLM), launched in 1988, is the program undertaken by the Government for adult education. It has been the topic of discussion at various United Nations forums, and was awarded the UNESCO Noma Literacy Prize in 1999. By the end of the 10th Plan Period (2002-2007) the NLM had made 127.45 million persons literate, of which 60% were females. To further bolster ‘Adult Education and Skill Development’, the Government also introduced two new schemes, namely Saakshar Bharat and Scheme for Support to Voluntary Agencies for Adult Education and Skill Development, during the 11th Plan. Saakshar Bharat is the world's largest adult education programme, which envisages making 70 million adults literate by 2017.

Excerpt from the World Education Forum (UNESCO)’s Education For All Assessment Report:

“The goal of NLM is to attain full literacy (with the sustainable threshold level of 75 per cent). NLM envisages that focussing on imparting of functional literacy to non-literate in the 15-35 age group would help achieve this goal. This age group has been selected because they are in the productive as well as the reproductive period of life.

NLM seeks to bring non-literate to a level of self-reliance in the three R’s (Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic). It also provides them facilities for skill development to improve their economic status and well-being. It enables them to imbibe values of national integration, conservation of the environment, women’s equality and observance of small family norms. And finally, it facilitates their participation in the development process.

Functional literacy, encompassing all of the above, is the overall goal of NLM.”

NGOs and other initiatives

1) The Indian Adult Education Association, probably the oldest organisation dedicated to the cause, was established in 1939. Dr. Zakir Hussain, former President of India, who served on the committee of the IAEA for 10 years as its Vice President, is quoted as saying, “The history of the IAEA is the history of adult education in India,” from which it can be concluded that very little was done in this space prior to the IAEA’s formation.

IAEA organises conferences and training programmes for adult educators in the country, as well as functionaries in the Government, and enrolls high-profile Government officials, educators and social workers. The International Institute of Adult and Lifelong Education (IIALE) was set up by the IAEA in 2002.
2) **NLM & NGOs:** As part of the revision of the NLM programme in 1999, NGOs were given a major role in the plan for adult education, either by partnership with the State Resource Centres, or by running their own continuing education programs, vocational training, etc. It was then expected that “NGOs would take up more innovative projects, which would serve as examples for making policy changes by the NLM.” For this, NGOs were invited to apply for grants from the NLM.

3) **Public-Private Partnership (PPP):** A number of public sector enterprises\(^2\) have extended their support to the Saakshar Bharat Program. There are partnerships with the private sector as well, for example, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) which has supported the campaign for literacy with its Computer Based Functional Literacy Program that has now been accepted as part of the 12th 5-year plan of the Government of India. The PPP model is emerging as an important channel in development, especially through the National Vocational Education Qualification Framework (NVEQF).

4) **Indian Literacy Project (ILP) and other organisations:** Formed in 1990 in the USA, ILP partners with local NGOs to “Play the role of a catalyst for literacy”. ILP has supported nearly 100 projects since its inception, benefiting around 220,000 children, youth and adults.

There are also NGOs working in this space, such as Tara Akshar, Nirantar and CORO for Literacy.

5) **Night Schools:** There are around 200 independently functioning night schools in Maharashtra (150 of which are in Mumbai). The advantage of night schools is that they provide an opportunity for youth and adults who have to work during the day, to still pursue their education post work hours. Though the concept of night schools is unique to only a few states (mainly Maharashtra), it would be beneficial to replicate the night school model across the country. Masoom is an NGO that works with night schools in Mumbai, and has developed a model for improvement of the night school education system.

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2: Gas Authority India Limited, Hindustan Petrol Corporation Limited, Power Finance Corporation, Container Corporation of India Limited and Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, etc.

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**Ways to Support the Cause**

While the current figures for illiteracy are still daunting, it is heartening to know that the Government through its Literacy Mission, as well as citizens through various forums and organisations, are now systematically approaching the issue and bringing down the adverse rates steadily. Measures such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education Act are wide-scale initiatives to ensure that the future generations of Indians will be given better access to education, and, therefore, not be as susceptible to illiteracy as their predecessors.
It is important to mobilize support for the promotion of literacy and adult education, especially in the following ways:

1) **Public-Private Partnerships**: Other organisations in the private sector can take the example of TCS and use their resources to develop valuable aids to assist the Government in imparting education to adults across the country. Technology-based solutions, especially mobile phone-based ones, are most likely to successfully reach out to a large portion of the population at a much lower cost.

2) **Awareness & Fundraising**: Partnering with NGOs to create awareness for the cause – for example the “Back-a-thon” (backwards walk) organised by the NGO Make a Difference (MAD) in 20 cities across the country to raise public awareness on illiteracy. Fundraising initiatives would also go a long way in providing NGOs with financial resources to implement their programs, as well as draw attention and support to their work. Companies can also consider options like “payroll giving” and regular NGO visits for their employees.

3) **Volunteering**: Assisting NGOs by enrolling as volunteers to teach the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. Professionals from all walks of life can also volunteer their services to help build the capacity of the NGOs in areas such as strategy, financial management, human resource management, etc. Strengthening the NGO as an organisation would help set a strong foundation and enable higher productivity and success of the program.

4) **Advocacy**: Outreach and impact can be significantly expanded when NGOs partner with the Government and avail the benefits of the various schemes and budgets that can be utilised for program implementation. For this, strategic advocacy efforts are required on the part of NGOs in this space.

5) **Collaboration of NGOs**: NGOs that are involved in similar causes would stand to benefit by collaborating their efforts and building on each other’s learning and proven successes in the field. Endeavours must be made to identify such NGOs and find a way to synergize their programs for perhaps a more efficient and wider outreach.

Adult education programs ought to be treated slightly differently given the special needs of their beneficiaries. They should have more of a vocational training focus to them, to enable these adults to start making a living from their education as soon as possible. This will not only retain their interest in the program, but will also serve as examples to other non-literate in the community.

While NGOs may work towards these goals, programs in adult education can only be truly successful with support from the Government and from other members in the community. Going by the progress made by the National Literacy Mission and the growing support from the private sector, we can perhaps optimistically look forward to a literate India in the fairly near future.
### Sources

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For the full list of NGOs in partnership with the Government, across all sectors, please visit: [http://ngo.india.gov.in/ngo_sector_ngo.php](http://ngo.india.gov.in/ngo_sector_ngo.php)