3

Participation of Learners in Functional Literacy Programme — A Study

S. B. Joshi*

Abstract

This paper is based on the low participation of learners in the existing implementation framework of functional adult literacy programmes. It explores conceptual and methodological issues, leading to low participation due to gaps in the planning of programmes and impact of feasible planning in enhancing the participation of adult beneficiaries in contemporary literacy programmes. The paper compares planning perspectives on literacy and their implementation to achieve goals through increased learner participation. It argues that instead of merely chalking out plans on the basis of centralised and uniform norms, the process, particularly, in vulnerable areas may be need-based, leading to feasibility in implementation.

The outcomes of literacy programmes can be increased by implementing the best practices adopted nationally or internationally along with convergence with various departments. The association of vocational education in literacy programmes has better output in the form of participation and achieving functional literacy.

It has been the experience of implementers that socio-economic factors, geographical diversities and difference in age groups have to be included in planning and implementation. Due to less space for flexibility in norms in various activities, interventions have not been executed to their expected level, which in turn not only resulted in prolonged time of execution but also escalation of project cost. This paper, primarily, focuses on critical review of concurrent interventions, impact of uniform norms, amount of flexibility and decentralised need-based planning for better attainment of objectives.

Keywords: Functional literacy, decentralised planning, implementation, adult literacy programme

* *Additional Director,* State Institute of Educational Management and Training *(*SIEMAT), Uttarakhand

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines functional literacy as the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, develop their knowledge and potential, and participate fully in their community and wider society."

The attainment of functional literacy through basic literacy programmes has been one of the focus areas in all non-formal education projects in India. Realising the close association of functional literacy and development, the *Saakshar Bharat* programme was implemented across the country in September 2009 through the National Literacy Mission and State Literacy Mission, the implementing agencies at the national and State levels, respectively.

Various non-formal education programmes, such as Total Literacy Campaign and Post Literacy Programme, had basic literacy as one of the prime aims. *Saakshar Bharat* is a variant of the earlier literacy programmes and has been implemented in districts having female literacy rate below the national average and increased gender gaps.

Implementation units of *Saakshar Bharat* programme at the village panchayat level have been named 'adult education centres' and 'literacy centres'. Adult education centres are management units and function as nodal centres for all literacy activities at the panchayat level. The performance of functionaries, such as *Prerak* (village coordinator) and volunteer teachers, especially, at this level, has been crucial to achieve the objectives.

This paper focuses on the review of implementation pattern and participation of learners in its major activities, such as survey, trainings and quality of teaching–learning material, along with methods of instruction amalgamated with vocational education.

OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to achieve the following objectives.

- To analyse the participation of non-literates or beneficiaries with respect to the present norms and implementation methods
- To explore ways to increase the participation of beneficiaries on the basis of successful interventions

RESEARCH METHOD

Research method is mostly based on secondary data and findings of various researches in the area of adult literacy, which has been a vast unorganised area of non-formal education system. Case study, referring to the participation of learners, is also taken as an example. Besides, primary data have been collected from learners.

Survey and identification of implementation areas

The identification of implementation areas of functional literacy programme was on the basis of Census 2001. Areas having more than 26 per cent gap in male and female literacy level and literacy below the national average were selected.

The secondary data reflect that districts selected for adult literacy programme, i.e., *Saakshar Bharat* districts, have a low female literacy rate.

The Asia-Pacific region does not have a comprehensive framework for adult learning and education. Efforts are fragmented and divided between multiple actors in the field without a clear targeting of the clientele and strategy for participation and equity. While adult education programmes in developing countries focus on providing 'basic competencies' in literacy, and sometimes numeracy, participation in these programmes is still disparate and unequal in terms of gender, age, location, and ethnic and linguistic categories (Ahmad, 2008).

A mid-term study conducted by the Indian Institute of Management (IIM)–Lucknow (Vikas, 2013) stated that identification of areas for literacy implementation should be based on a survey. Such a survey must study areas having very low literacy rate with focus on religious groups, gender disparity, tribal areas and working sites.

For effective planning, research work needs to be reinforced in areas, where deficits have been identified, such as gender differentials, dropouts, lapsing into illiteracy, as well as, ways of empowering women and village panchayats to activate progress towards adult literacy (Paintal, 2006).

Table 1: Literacy rate (in %) in various Uttarakhand districts

Districts	Male literacy		Female literacy		Gender gap in literacy	
	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011
Almora	89.2	89.26	60.56	70.44	28.64	18.82
Chamoli	89.66	94.18	61.63	73.20	28.03	20.98
Dehradun	85.87	90.32	71.2	79.61	14.67	10.71
Pauri	90.91	93.18	65.7	73.26	25.21	19.92
Nainital	86.32	91.09	69.53	78.21	16.77	12.88
Pithoragarh	90.06	93.45	62.59	72.97	27.47	20.48
Rudra Prayag	89.81	94.97	59.57	70.94	30.24	24.03
*Bageshwar	87.65	93.2	56.98	69.59	30.67	22.61
*Champawat	87.27	92.65	54.18	68.81	33.09	23.84

*Haridwar	73.83	82.26	52.1	65.96	21.73	16.30
*Tehri Garhwal	85.33	89.91	49.42	61.77	35.91	28.14
*Udham Singh Nagar	75.22	82.48	53.35	65.73	21.87	16.75
*Uttarkashi	83.6	89.26	46.69	62.23	36.91	27.03

Source: Census 2001   *_Saakshar Bharat_ districts

Regional imbalance was not considered while planning for the programme, resulting in uneven progress in Uttarakhand. Gram panchayats in hill areas have lagged behind for want of human and financial resources (Vikas, 2013).

Planning for permanent adult literacy centres for lifelong learning

In hilly areas with low population density, operational cost and cost of education for literacy per learner has been comparatively higher.

Making rooms available for Adult Education Centres (AECs) in classrooms of schools or in panchayat buildings or any other government building has not been a problem. However, some AECs in government buildings are not utilised by beneficiaries as they are in a dilapidated condition.

AECs have to be established within the reach of the learners and appropriate space through resource allocation has to be ensured.

Continuing education, as a component of adult literacy programmes, has been the objective of AECs, which could not be made functional because of more concentration on volunteer mode programme, i.e., to convert non-literate into neo-literate with teaching–learning of nearly six months. Hence, the idea of converting continuing education centres into lifelong learning centres has to be implemented.

Assessment method

There are two major problems with the existing approaches to obtaining exact data on literacy. First, they are based on different definitions and methods of data collection, such as self-referential categorisation, proxy indicators or standardised test, etc. Second, they do not take into consideration the pluralities of literacy, i.e., multiple illiteracies.

The dominant approach to literacy assessment does not pay attention to literacy practices embedded into the social context. It is assumed that literacy is universal and literacy skills (reading, writing and arithmetic) are detached from social practices (Ila Patel, 2009).

Planning for effective training and motivation of village level functionaries

Training is imparted in 'cascade model', where state-level trainers develop key resource persons at

the district level, who train master trainers and the cascade goes down to volunteer teachers and village-level coordinators. Training is conducted through key resource persons and master trainers — one master trainer for every 25–30 volunteer teachers and one key resource person for every 25–30 master trainers. Firstly, the key resource persons are trained, who in turn train the master trainers. Volunteer teachers are then trained by the master trainers in batches (National Literacy Mission document, 2008).
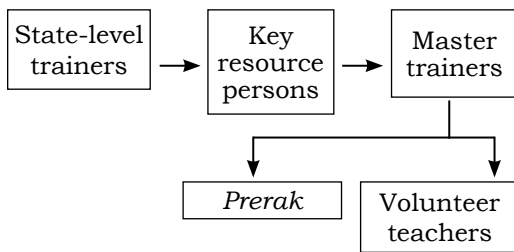

Fig. 1: Cascade approach of training

In order to design training programmes for all functionaries, training needs must be regularly assessed. Due to the absence of assessment of training needs or training based on the need of learners, volunteer teachers and *Prerak* have not been able to motivate the learners and increase their participation based on their interests.

Shah (2004), on the basis of several evaluation studies, reported that although the cascade approach of training has been useful in training a large number of functionaries in the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC),

training of volunteer instructors has become a low priority because of diminishing resources in terms of training content, material, duration, funds and technical inputs to TLCs. Training inputs are, generally, based on literacy-based Primers and very little on andragogy (method and practice of teaching adult learners; adult education), adult psychology and learning styles.

Most government institutes reduce training to mere transmission of knowledge and follow the top-down and lecture-based approach of training (Dighe, 1995).

Linking with equivalency and credit transfer system

An equivalency programme, generally, focuses on deprived populations but it can also be an alternative route to education for those who lack access to conventional education systems. Equivalency programme under the government's *Saakshar Bharat* programme aims to provide a second chance to those who have missed out opportunities of formal education.

Equivalency programmes will have to be inbuilt in the system of adult education programmes for appropriate implementation of adult literacy programmes and compulsory primary education. Various studies have shown that neo-literates, who have achieved basic literacy, are keen to attain higher level certification, i.e., at least up to the elementary level of education. They can be linked with some utility,

such as proof of qualification, basis for enrolment in school education and basis for the calculation of age.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) needs to become a part of equivalency and it will help sustain learning interest among adults, especially, neo-literates (expert committee on National Curriculum Framework on adult education, 2011).

The National Literacy Mission, introduced as a technological and societal mission, adopted a campaign to eradicate illiteracy on a large scale but it did not pay attention to post-literacy and continuing education.

Linking functional literacy with income generation

Adult literacy programmes must include component of vocational education right from the initial stage. Functionality needs to be treated as the core for adult learning.

The mobilisation of adult illiterates and that of the society is a challenge for countries. Motivation and enrolling the illiterates in adult education centres is a challenging task but ensuring their regularity has always been a problem. Meeting their daily needs and earning is a prime concern for the learners. Therefore, training in vocational education has been tried to motivate them.

Adult literacy emphasises on equipping the learners with literacy skills. Having acquired this instrument, the learners may continue to participate in education. The somewhat narrow and restrictive view of literacy skills, as well as, their separation as a goal from life skills, appears to have denied it a role within the common framework of lifelong learning. There is a pronounced 'skill gap', both in terms of quality and quantity. Besides, the current vocational education and training infrastructure is not geared to meet the industry requirements [Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) report on the case for setting Sector Skill Councils, 2009].

Success story

Kanaura, a village panchayat with more than 80 per cent minority population in Bajpur block of Udham Singh Nagar district, has been covered under the *Saakshar Bharat* programme on account of low literacy and higher gender gap in literacy. A village coordinator (*Prerak*) took the responsibility of managing the teaching–learning and other activities of programme. She, initially, found it difficult to increase the participation of learners but, gradually, started linking earning activities like tailoring with sewing machine of her own. She was able to maximise learner participation and community by nearly up to 100 per cent and the panchayat won the *Saakshar Bharat* Award−2012 for her work.

Convergence with departments

China's literacy programmes aimed at ensuring literacy among working groups and farmers. They were easy to organise. Flexible classes were planned, in terms of spare time, seasonal and night schools. The cadres were motivated to teach adults. There was a strong political will in the system (Paintal, 2006).

The primary data on the need for literacy programmes to be associated with various other activities, which have been obtained from learners or neo-literates of one of the panchayats in Bajpur block, Uttarakhand, reflected that nearly 70 per cent of them felt the need for skill development programmes, 55 per cent for equivalency, 70 per cent for opportunity cost, 55 per cent for linking with jobs and 70 per cent for literacy with awareness programmes.

Teaching–learning methods

Malcolm Knowles (1913–97), a pioneer in the study of adult learning, observed that adults learn the best when they understand why something is important to know or do, and have the freedom to learn in their own way. Learning is experiential, i.e., the time is right for them to reflect on their experiences and learn, and the process is positive and encouraging. Teaching–learning methods must be based on andragogy, where adult learners must feel that they are participating directly in the teaching–learning process.

Funding pattern

The mid-term assessment of the *Saakshar Bharat* programme has concluded that the State Literacy Mission Authority (SLMA), in
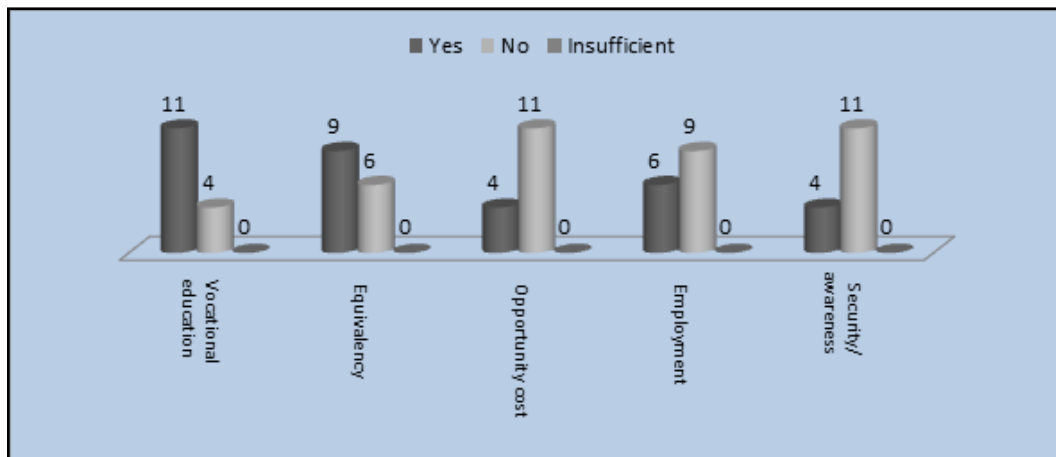

Fig. 2: Primary data collected from a village panchayat of Bajpur block, Uttarakhand

consultation with the National Literacy Mission Authority (NLMA), may work on a mechanism that takes care of the learners in remote hilly areas.

Grant on the basis of the learners' count neither works logistically nor financially in these locations. Special provisions need to be made to accommodate geographical variations. For example, the *Prerak*–learner ratio would be low in certain geographical areas compared to other parts. Provision for adequate transport allowance should be made (Vikas, 2013).

Selection, motivation and attrition rate of volunteers

According to the guidelines of the *Saakshar Bharat* programme, voluntary literacy educators are not paid remuneration. They need to be motivated to carry out the job of spreading literacy through different means, including public recognition at various levels and acknowledging their contributions, besides other incentives and rewards.

The payment of honorarium to literacy educators may also be considered by the State governments, gram panchayats and NLMA through funding sources, including donations or funds generated from public–private partnership. Volunteer teachers are seldom available to run literacy centres in sparsely populated hilly areas. There has been a consistent demand for incentives in lieu of volunteer teaching. Studies emphasise

that mobilising the youth to volunteer can be accelerated by incentives and certification.

The introduction of paid project staff in continuing education appears to have shifted the focus away from volunteering at the grassroot level. With growing emphasis on paid functionaries in running post–literacy and continuing education centres, the involvement of volunteers has been reduced (Mathew, 2002).

Conclusion

- It is evident from various studies that inclusive decentralised planning, based on disaggregated data, will lead to the achievement of objectives of adult literacy along with increased participation of beneficiaries.

- Adult education centres play a crucial role but permanent buildings are necessary to increase the participation of learners.

- Effective training of participants, based on the Training Needs Analysis (TNA) of all stakeholders, is compulsory in order to find out the actual needs of the learners, and all primers-based teaching–learning activities must be inclined in the same direction.

- Low income groups are keen to acquire skills of income generation. Hence, adult literacy programmes linked with income generation skills necessarily increase participation.

- The involvement of skilled volunteers and literacy instructors

well-versed with andragogy leads to increased participation. Honorarium, certification or weightage in government services increase the learners' enthusiasm.

● Convergence with other departments working at the village panchayat level will necessarily enhance learner participation.

● Further, the funding pattern has been weak in adult literacy schemes. This needs to be made spontaneous. Discontinuity in release of funds affects the outcomes of the programmes.

REFERENCES

AHMAD, MANZOOR. 2008. The state and development of adult learning and education in Asia and the Pacific Regional Synthesis Report 2008.

COMINGS, J.P., C. SMITH, S. LEVINE, A.J. DOWD AND B. GARNER. 1997. 'A comparison of impact from schooling and participation in an adult literacy program among women in Nepal'. National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

CONFEDERATION OF INDIAN INDUSTRIES. 2009. 'Case for Setting up Sector Skill Councils in India'. CII National Conference on Education 2009. 'Linking Education to Employability'. New Delhi.

DIGHE, A. 1995. 'Deconstructing Literacy Primers'. *Economic and Political Weekly.* India. pp 1559–1561.

UNESCO. 2006–11. Global LIFE Mid-term Evaluation Report. *LIFE-Literacy Initiative for Empowerment 2005&15.* UNESCO, Paris.

OXENHAM, ET AL. 2002. 'Skills and Literacy Training for Better Livelihoods'. Human Development Sector, Africa Region. World Bank, Washington, D.C.

PAINTAL, MANJEET. 2006. Adult Education in India, Indonesia, Thailand and China — A Comparative Study.

PATEL, ILA. 2009, 'Adult learning and lifelong learning in India'. Mid-term Assessment. NUEPA, New Delhi.

PRIYADARSHI, PUSHPENDRA AND R.M. VIKAS. 2013. 'Term Review of *Saakshar Bharat* Programme: A Comparative Report'. North India.

REPORT OF THE EXPERT COMMITTEE. 2010. National Curriculum Framework for Adult Education 2010. NCERT, New Delhi.

THE BELEM FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION (Final document of the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education), 4 December 2009.

Working Group on 'Elementary Education and Literacy' for the Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012–17).