

Low female literacy: factors and strategies

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Literacy is a process which dispels and promotes rational thinking and moulds human beings into becoming responsible citizens. The absence of literacy directly and indirectly retards the development of individuals, society, community and the country. For the success of any program, people should be motivated by providing necessary congenial environments, socio-economic conditions and committed efforts on the part of implementing bodies. In spite of the number of efforts made by central and state governments in India, still illiterates remain. This paper identifies factors responsible for people remaining illiterate and suggests strategies to adopt for achieving better results in the district which has the lowest literacy rate in the state and country.

Literacy is one of the key aspects of human resource development. In order to quantify the human resources of the country, the State and central governments have launched a number of educational (both formal and non-formal) programs for the promotion of literacy. As a result, large pools of illiterates were made literates. However, a vast majority of the illiterates are here, particularly among females.

Literacy is a process, which dispels ignorance and promotes rational thinking. Literacy thus moulds a person to become a responsible citizen. In a democratic society, people cannot remain as silent spectators to the vast changes that are taking place in the society. But they have to participate effectively not only in decision-making processes, but also in formulation and implementation of developmental programs. To achieve this objective, all the citizens need to be educated. In other words, literacy is the tool for development.

Women, who contribute half of our population, have the dubious distinction of maintaining a lower profile in many social, educational and economic aspects across the world. In the context of India, the phenomenon has been further worsened with women occupying lower positions in terms of educational, health, political and economic aspects and relegated to lower positions in society. Women have been treated as lesser contributors to society in terms of social and economic development issues. Though women have favourable attitudes and appropriate capacities to contribute to society, the social milieu in developing countries like India has always positioned women with a lesser role to play in social and economic issues.

Women constitute an important segment among the less-advantaged sections of society by virtue of their backwardness in terms of social, educational and economic development irrespective of their religion, caste and creed. In the last few decades, this aspect has been much debated at the international level and a global movement has been initiated in terms of gender sensitisation.

Professor Kanta Ahuja (1995:1), the Vice-Chancellor of Maharishi Dayanand Saraswati University in Ajmer, Rajasthan State, stated that 'girls were being kept out of school because their parents did not appreciate the importance and value of education. The condition of the school and the quality of education, especially in the government schools in the rural areas, were other bottlenecks in attracting children towards school'. She feared that, unless the widening gender gap was reduced, illiterates in the age group 15–35 years would only be women.

The World Declaration of Education for All was proclaimed at the World Conference on Education for All held in March 1990 at Jomtie. Article-1 of the Declaration read: 'Every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs. These needs comprise both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives to make informed decisions, and to continue learning. The scope of basic learning needs and how they should be met varies with individual countries and culture, and inevitably, changes with passage of time'. About two and half decades ago, similar thinking was reflected in *Learning to be: The world of education today and tomorrow*.

Significance of the study

According to the 2001 census, Andhra Pradesh literacy is 61.1 percent. Within this figure, 51.2 percent are females and 70.9 percent are males. The Mahabubnager district ranks 23rd in literacy out of 23 districts of Andhra Pradesh with 45.5 percent of literates. Among them, 57.9 percent are men and 32.8 percent are women. This

indicates that the Mahabubnager district has the lowest literacy percentage in both genders in the State. This is the reason why this study has been undertaken.

Locale and sample of the study

In order to study the factors influencing the low female literacy in Mahabubnager district, Andhra Pradesh was chosen as the focus of this study. Two mandals and ten villages from each mandal, involving ten women respondents in each village, were randomly selected for the study. The study was conducted on a sample of 200 women only.

Administration and data collection

The data were collected from the women by administering a schedule that was developed for this study. Each female was asked to cite a minimum of three main factors for not attending formal schooling in early childhood, for not enrolling their children in schools, as well as not attending an adult education program. They were also requested to offer suggestions for improving literacy. The schedule was personally canvassed to women respondents. The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) technique was adopted for the interviews.

Objectives of the study

The primary aim of the study was to analyse the factors contributing to low female literacy in the Mahabubnager district of Andhra Pradesh. In addressing this aim, the study focused on the following objectives:

- to identify the root causes for the low female literacy in Mahabubnager District, Andhra Pradesh
- to elicit opinions from various categories such as age, social class, literates and illiterates, and
- to establish strategies to be adopted from the responses and suggestions obtained from women respondents for enhancing

female literacy, particularly in a rural and backward district like Mahabubnager.

Profile of the respondents (N=200)

The table below shows the background of the women respondents.

Sl. no.	Personal characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
1	Age: 20 or below	66	33
	21 – 30	56	28
	31 – 40	50	25
	41 and above	28	14
2	Education: Literate	64	32
	Illiterate	136	68
3	Caste: Backward Castes	62	31
	Scheduled Caste	80	40
	Scheduled Tribe	12	6
	Minorities	46	23

One-third (n=66) were 20 years or below, while 28 percent (n=56) were between 21 and 30 years and the remaining 39 percent were older than 30 years. One hundred and thirty six (68%) illiterate respondents were involved in the interviews for the study. Regarding their social class, 40 percent (n=80) were Scheduled Caste, 31 percent (n=62) were Backward Caste and 23 per cent (n=46) of the respondents belonged to Minority communities.

Factors as perceived by the respondents

The following factors were given by respondents as causes for low female literacy in Mahabubnager District of Andhra Pradesh

Social factors

- migration for work in seasonal periods
- early marriages as per their social custom
- girl children are not allowed to go outside the house and village because it is a social taboo
- parents go to their workplaces and household activities are undertaken by the young female children
- caring of younger ones at home
- gender disparity at home, in society and earlier marriages in this region, and
- sharing of family responsibilities after the death of elders in the family.

Unfavourable environment

- drought is common in the district: as a result, children are also engaged in earning income along with their parents for their livelihood
- respondents admitted that they were more interested in television, cinemas, songs, games (in the case of the children) and passing time in chatting rather than learning
- the infighting of parents in the home environment
- looking after children and/or old people and discouragement from neighbours
- disinterest of parents towards the education of children
- lack of high school(s) in nearby places
- no proper guidance after school hours, and at home, and not able to afford to undertake tuition on payment
- lack of proper seating arrangements in school
- teachers not regularly coming to the school, teachers absent some days and, sometimes due to housework, the children also absent, and
- low performance in class and not keeping up with other students.

Apathy of government officials

- lack of familiarity with the functioning of adult education centres
- ineffective linkage between economic developmental programs and literacy, and
- inadequate training on the part of functionaries concerning retention of students/learners in the learning environment (drop-outs).

Lack of educational facilities

- schools are located at long distances from home
- inadequate teaching staff, classrooms, teaching-learning materials, games and recreational provisions
- lack of textbooks / notebooks / pencils and not being able to afford to purchase, and
- non-availability of hostel facilities.

Economic factors

- most families cannot afford to educate girls
- because of poverty, girls will be sent to work with landlords or to nearby cities
- assisting parents in cattle-rearing / duck-rearing and fetching firewood
- helping parents in their daily professional (caste) occupational work, like weaving, plumbing and so on, and
- lack of proper dress to go to school.

Perceptions

- people believe that education is not of much use for their daily life
- general feeling among people living on or below the poverty line that it is difficult, and not useful, to spend money for children's education
- fear of ridicule from friends, neighbours and others
- afraid to send a girl alone to school / college
- lack of awareness about education, and
- education not being seen as essential in advanced age.

Health factors

- frequent ill-health of the students, due to lack of nutritious food and unhygienic conditions in living areas.

Strategies

The following strategies, suggested after recording respondents' views and personal field observations of the investigators, are measures that can be considered by planners and implementing agencies to enhance the literacy rate of women in general and particularly in the backward districts.

1. Steps should be taken to understand and create awareness to solve the problems among themselves.
2. Migration is one of the causes as per the observation of the investigators. The government and voluntary agencies can plan to create alternative residences for girl students while their parents migrate during work seasons.
3. The literacy centre had to be run in convenient times for the women with their consultation because they may be tired physically after work in their occupational field. From the responses, it was noted that many have no knowledge about the existence of adult education centers. The need for effective environment building and motivational strategies are to be created.
4. As the problem of illiterates is greater in this district, the causes of lack of attending early child schooling, and disinterest in learning at advanced age, are due to poverty.
5. Self-realisation and self-acceptance greatly help to overcome various problems and contribute to better adjustment in society. Voluntary efforts will have higher impact in this respect. Factors relating to change of attitude are to be studied and identified and measures taken up accordingly.

6. Occupational and skill development training programs for women aimed at improving income status to be organised.
7. Provision of a separate adult education building so that the learners will have the feeling that they are not attending formal education. The villagers can monitor the learning activity.
8. Free girls' residential hostel facility at Panchayat level or for a cluster of villages.
9. Parents below the poverty line who are sending their children to schools be encouraged by giving preference in sanctioning of welfare schemes by the government machinery.
10. Women learners who regularly attend and successfully complete the three primers be given preference while sanctioning housing allotment. This will help permanent stay and reduce migration.
11. Compulsory enrolment of children in school at primary level and provision of a midday meal and reading-learning material may have a positive impact on the joining and retention of children in schooling. In principle, the government is providing some of these provisions, though in the processes of implementation, there are lacuna because of lack of monitoring and apathy on the part of the authorities.
12. Awareness process should be a continuous process, not time-bound, short-term or one-off.
13. Teachers and trainers need to be trained in the conditions of the particular areas or regions in which they are working in order to bring effective and lasting results in enrolling and attaining sufficient literacy levels among women.
14. Information and communication for rural development programs must be highlighted through village level functionaries. This will result in mass participation in learning activity.
15. The investigator noted that efforts are being made to create environments through the Jathas, Street Plays etc., but the suggestion is that any one-off effort is not sufficient to sustain the interest of learners and students. Therefore, with the assistance of local voluntary organisations, environment building should be a continuous process, so that the motivation of women and girls is sustained through to the completion of an education activity. It further emphasises that local talent should be utilised to create a need-based environment.
16. There is an urgent need to prepare more and more success stories through the print and audio-visual media so that both the educated and the uneducated can be inspired to participate in the national endeavour.
17. The print and electronic media, particularly television, can be utilised in the most effective manner. This media should create a congenial learning environment so that the society and the women folk join in and recognise the importance of education. This suggestion is very important because, from the responses, it was noted that the women are more interested in watching television serials.
18. At present, the mahila Mandals are playing a very limited role in promoting women's literacy. These units are not showing interest as they do in thrift activity. From the evaluation reports of Akshara Sankranthi, government efforts to link literacy and micro-finance did not have much effect.
19. The basic education advocated by Mahatma Gandhi be introduced for female education schools, at least in districts where very low female literacy prevails. This system is linked with income-generating activity so that parents can motivate and retain their children in formal schooling.
20. Education should not be introduced in isolation. It should go hand in hand with health, economic and social development, small savings, micro-finance and above all communal harmony. It should give people an immediate benefit, however small.
21. Officials while visiting the schools and non-formal education centres may adopt monitoring which should be a regular process carried out in a non-threatening and joyful manner.

22. Strengthening of Anganawadi, Balawadies and frequent visit of health personnel is necessary to motivate them.
23. Some of the issues in the prevailing low literacy levels, particularly for women and girls, include: traditional customs, lack of a healthy environment, lack of confidence, gender discrimination, feelings of insecurity, poverty, migration, the presence of vested-interest persons, non-commitment of officials, politicians' apathy, and the educated from the surroundings not encouraging drop-outs and illiterates to study further.

Historically, women in general have not enjoyed privileges, even in the Vedic period. Later on, the situation further degenerated during the post-Mahabharata and then in the Mugul periods. After Independence, government tried to build some provision in the Constitution to give women equal rights and status with men, but in practice little has been achieved. After hectic effort, thirty-three percent of women reservation was passed. The act to provide one-third seats in Parliament and the Assemblies has not come into effect even today.

The role of women in development is most intimately related to the goal of comprehensive social, educational and economic development, and is a strategic question for the development of all societies. In this regard, it is worthwhile quoting the words of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India: "To awaken the people, it is the woman who must be awakened and if she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the village moves and the nation moves". Thus, a long way back, Pandit Nehru visualised the importance of women in social, educational and economic development.

In contemporary society, we can understand the attitude of men and elders are not favorable towards women's participation in all important aspects of family and society. Right to education, right to poverty, the dowry system, child and early marriages, discrimination

in wages, not enjoying their part of earnings are some of the reasons which hold back the progress of women and the less advantaged sections in the society. Providing education is the only way to change women's position in the society.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "If I learn carpentry from an illiterate carpenter, I know how to do carpentry work. If I learn carpentry work from a literate person, my thoughts will also stimulate". This is the great vision of Mahatma. Thus, keeping the above in mind, planners, government, political parties and voluntary agencies can formulate their future strategies to improve women's literacy.

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