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ABSTRACT

Non-Formal Education (NFE) is traditionally defined as any organizational activity outside the established formal education system. In India two major types of NFE exist. The first type is literacy courses, available for students of any age; these are taught in the evenings. The second type is vocational training, which often takes place during the day. NFE in India is becoming a key factor in development work, not only because rural development is the most important goal for a better future in India, but also because NFE is, in practice, the only alternative for literacy for most women. Possible solutions for some of the major operational problems related to the NFE programs in India are proposed and discussed. These include methodology, teaching techniques, pupil assessment, and a number of physical hazards that act to hamper learner performance. A 20-item list of references is included.  
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# THE FUTURE OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION FOR WOMEN IN INDIA

## Problems and suggestions for a fruitful development

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## Chapter Eleven

# The Future of Non-Formal Education for Women in India Problems and Suggestions for a Fruitful Development

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### Introduction

The argument of this paper is that Non-Formal Education (NFE) in India is becoming a key factor in development work, not only because rural development is the most important goal for a better future in India, but also because NFE is, in practice, the only alternative for literacy for most women. In some areas, NFE is the only alternative also for the children. Although Non-Formal Education is accorded a lower standard compared to formal education, and seemingly also a low status among politicians, it is still possible to improve the quality of NFE within the available resources. This paper discusses some of the problems associated with NFE in India and suggests possible solutions to these problems.

The paper takes a practical rather than a theoretical view of the topic and describes how NFE could develop and improve from an optimistic standpoint. The paper does not, however, predict what NFE in reality will become.

### **Non-Formal Education: Definition and Scope**

Radcliffe & Colletta (1985) refer to Coomb's classic definition from 1973 that NFE is "any organizational activity outside the established formal system" (p. 35-36). The problem with this definition is that "the established formal system" in the first place needs to be identified, and secondly, there are always a number of diffusions between the two systems. Radcliffe & Colletta further point out that NFE is "locally specific in application". In practice however, NFE seems to take different meanings and assume different focus from country to country.

In India, two major types of NFE are in use. The first one is the literacy courses for students of virtually any age, and this normally takes place in the evenings. The second type is vocational training which often takes place during the day. The usual assumption however, is that NFE refers to the evening courses. When Mellbring *et al.* (1983) evaluated a SIDA NFE programme in India for instance, only the evening literacy courses were discussed. On the other hand, "vocational training" is very often used instead of NFE.

Within the domain of Non-Formal Education, vocational education is generally concerned with very simple skills, such as learning to operate a sewing machine, or to learning how to type or solder electrical components and so on, but very often, reading, writing and arithmetics, as well as English or Hindi are added to the programme. Thus there is a good deal of overlapping between literacy and the vocational courses. Yet, in some parts of the country, for instance in Orissa, West Bengal, and Bihar, it is quite clear that NFE centres concentrate on basic literacy courses and exclude both vocational and polytechnic aspects of the training.

### **The Setting**

The literacy courses usually take place in a NFE-Centre consisting of a shed or hut, often made of clay. It often lacks windows, and typically, it is without electric power despite the fact that the sessions

take place in the evenings. The shed is a small hut without windows, which becomes quite hot in the evenings after a whole day of sunshine. When many people are gathered, the heat becomes even greater when the kerosene lamps are lit.

In a typical setting, there is only one NFE Centre catering for a whole village of up to six kilometre radius. This means that participants have to walk a considerable distance to come to the nearest centre. Sometimes participants, especially the girls and the women, have to stay the night in order to avoid walking home in the darkness of the late evening. Participants attend classes 6 or 7 nights a week, for about 6 months of the year. The actual lesson time varies from two to four hours every night. This adds up to at least 500 hours or more per year.

Apart from the physical strains of walking long distances and the many hours spent every evening, trying to learn under the extremely difficult circumstances, the sheer motivation displayed by the participants deserves to be noted irrespective of whether the NFE effort is initiated within a domestic or foreign framework of a development project.

### **The Teachers, the Pupils and Basic Activities**

An NFE-teacher is a literate person, mostly without higher schooling, and typically without teacher training. Sometimes students who themselves attend school in grade 8, 9 or 10 work as teachers in the evening. Often the NFE teachers are volunteers, paid with a token sum. Most Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) try to provide some in-service training, usually in the form of seminars. The following quotation from Ekstrand (1989) is illustrative:

Once a month, there is a training session in Jamda for the NFE teachers, that lasts one day. Most teachers do not have proper teacher training. They "know from their own experience in school". The training session usually consists

of discussions among the teachers about their class-room experiences (Ekstrand 1989).

Students are mostly adults, but there may also be children present. In some cases, especially in many villages, or city slum areas, where there are no schools, children are the dominant group of participants. One typical rural constraint however, is that even when there is a school in the village, children do not always attend as they have to look after the younger siblings, tend cattle, help in the fields, or collect fuel. On the other hand, some of the older adults may not be interested in really learning to read or write. They come to the NFE centres basically for the discussions, and to participate in the social exchange.

Although most NFE centres were, in the beginning, dominated by the men, quite a number of them now consist of mixed groups. It is now also becoming more and more common that the women demand to have a centre of their own. Sometimes the local Village Council, or in the cities, the Colony Council, realises that an NFE centre so important that they initiate one for the women too.

The basic activities are to learn the alphabet, some simple reading, and to learn to count and to do some simple arithmetics. Sometimes, things of importance are discussed, such as the maintenance of the new tube well, or where the new irrigation ditch should be dug, or what kind of crop to grow, and so on. Sometimes, textbooks contain such information. The texts are read over and again, and the contents are discussed. People who can neither read nor write generally have to rely on oral information, and are thus dependent on opportunities to discuss their affairs. Very often, classes are started and finished by a sung "prayer", or hymn composed by the participants themselves on a relevant topic such as immunization or health.

The womens' NFE centres conducts a number of income generating activities. Thus, the women make paper bags or leaf plates, or roll biris, (which are small Indian cigarettes). While they

work, they discuss women's affairs. Their special topics may be the pros and cons of some current programme such as GOBI, the usefulness of monitoring the child's height and weight, of immunization or breast-feeding. It may also be on how to generate more income, how to make the most of their kitchen gardening, and so on. In a well organized community development programme, new information is fed via mass meetings, child-care centres, and sometimes via the texts used in reading.

### **Methodology: Aims, Techniques and Functionality**

There are three aims for NFE; literacy, functionality, and awareness. This means the provision of "functional literacy" on the one hand, and the creation of some insights in personal and community health and general well-being as well as the acquisition of some basic skills through training on the other. Simply put, the methodology is geared to explain the basic principles of improving the economy: in words; through books, and through pictures. Some audio-visual means are occasionally used and teachers try to develop communication skills in their students. Learning how to count is usually the most successful skill taught since everyone is interested not only in getting the best price at the market, but also in avoiding being cheated in various situations.

The usual technique for teaching how to read in NFE Centers is the spelling method. The letters of the alphabet are put together to form words. Other methods that exist, such as the phonetic method, which is far superior, (see for instance Chall 1967; Guthrie *et al.* 1976; Stebbins 1977) have, unfortunately not yet taken root in the NFE programmes. The phonetic method would be particularly suitable for NFE centres, as the principle is relatively simpler, and it is fairly easy to switch from the spelling method to the phonetic method. This method, however, is most efficient if the spelling and the pronunciation of the language coincide to a fair degree, as in Swedish, Orya and Bengali. Languages such as English, with a

spelling that is very different from the pronunciation, have difficulties with both methods. In West Bengal however, adaptations of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's "Barna Parichaya", and Jogendra Nath Sarkar's "Hasti Khushi" are being made to introduce the phonetic method. The former book has been used already in the LWS Ultadanga project in Calcutta.

Despite these efforts however, the experience of the author has been that even those NFE students who have "learnt" how to read and write are still unable to read even simple unknown texts, or to write documents of their own, such as personal letters. Writing exercises usually consists of copying text, and reading consists of reading, over and over again, the well known contents of the reading book in use. This challenges the aim of functional literacy and thus demands that the scope of the literacy lessons should be broadened to cover the reading of unknown texts, and the writing of simple messages and letters.

Remedial teaching in its simplest form involves starting the whole alphabetization process all over from the beginning, as many reading problems consist of students not having grasped the principle, or trying to read too fast but other methods of evaluating the reading progress should also be introduced. This must consist of individual assessment and of simple diagnostic tests. The tests could be teacher-made, and administered while the other students get on with their tasks.

### **Physical Conditions and Equipments**

*Light.* In India as in other tropical and subtropical areas, the length of day and night do not differ very much. The sun sets around 6 p.m. in the summer and around 5 p.m. in the winter. Hence, evening courses always occur in dark. The standard lighting equipment in many NFE centres is two, sometimes four kerosene lamps. There are enough difficulties in trying to read at night from

such a dim light source. Often, it is almost impossible to see any text without having the lamp so close that one almost gets burnt. Increasing the number of lamps does not improve the situation much. People with poor vision, elderly people who need more light than the young, people with night blindness and many others need substantial lighting far beyond what any number of kerosene lamps may give.

Portable petrol driven generators on the other hand, cost between 5,000 and 6,000 Rupees a piece, and give between 3 and 4 kilowatts. Such generators can be used to provide power for pumps, for electric light in NFE Centers and elsewhere, and for educational equipment of various kinds, such as video cassette players for NFE. Another possible alternative to the lighting problem is the strong kerosene pressure lamps now readily available in most urban centres. These Petromax lamps cost about 4-500 Rupees. This is certainly more expensive than the ordinary kerosene lamp, but the light output is many times that of the kerosene lamp. A third solution is to conduct the NFE courses during day-time. Certain arrangements, such as the work organization, labor exchange with neighbours and so on, could make this possible.

*Climatic conditions.* During the late spring and summer, the heat and the rains during the monsoon are effective obstacles against educational activities. However, during this very time, there is a low season in agriculture and villagers have more time to participate. It is a pity that this season cannot be used for education. Although cyclones, floods, and droughts which tend to interrupt or destroy normal activities are quite common occurrences, NFE can also be used to teach people how to minimise the damage, by building sturdier houses and dams, and improving irrigation.

*Equipment.* Due to lack of resources, NFE Centers are, most often, very poorly equipped. Typically there is no furniture. Teacher and students sit on the floor, or stand. Audiovisual equipment is usually

non-existent. In one polytechnic school, students were learning to type. There were five or six old-fashioned typewriters. The real problem, however, was the tables. These were very high, so the students had to lift their arms to the height of their shoulders while typing. This very soon leads to muscle problems and cramp. Some ergonomics knowledge could be conveyed to NFE teachers through in-service training.

### **A Problem Inventory and Suggested Solutions**

*Physical and Clinical problems.* India is believed to have a fairly high rate of hearing impairments. Poor vision is also quite common. In addition to ordinary visual problems, such as short-sightedness, nightblindness due to lack of vitamin A is prevalent. Lack of energy, due to malnutrition is also a contributing factor to poor attendance and poor performance. In NFE Centers, simple tests of vision and hearing could be easily performed. Hearing can be tested in a simple way that was in use in health examinations of school children and soldiers in Sweden until not long ago. The tester whispers words from one corner, and the testee answers from the other corner. Testing of short or long-sightedness can be easily arranged, provided that a board with letters is available. Once ascertained, the student with hearing or vision problems should be referred for medical treatment, whenever available. If medical care is not available, or the student cannot afford it, the teacher can at least place those with hearing and vision problems in front. The teacher can also give a little extra help to those students, and make sure that they have understood their tasks.

*Achievements and problems.* Some of the problems involved in NFE appears in the following account of a seminar with NFE teachers in a Lutheran World Service project in Bijatala in Orissa (Ekstrand 1989). The meeting took place in Bijatala on March 23,

1988, at 10 o'clock in the morning. There was a large group of around 50 persons, consisting of NFE teachers, Village Committee members, and some students. They represented 23 centres, out of which 17 are for males, 4 for females, and 2 for children. The total number of students overall was around 450. Most teachers were below matriculation, although a few had higher education. Teaching problems as outlined by the teachers were listed as follows:

1. Problems connected with the inadequacy of physical conditions and facilities (e.g., light, localities).
2. Problems related to finance (e.g., teachers' salaries and other resources).
3. Problems pertaining to the nature and quality of the syllabus (e.g., that the syllabus is too monotonous).
4. Problems arising from insufficient utilization of audio-visual and other teaching aids; and finally,
5. Problems related to the general shortage of reading texts and relevant literature.

To begin with, the teacher's salary is 60 rupees per month. The teacher works every evening during six months, which is about 150 lessons, each lasting several hours, but payment is done once for the whole year. The problems with audio-visual means are discussed in terms of video utilization. A video cassette player, a TV monitor, and a portable generator have to be carried from Rajranpur. There is a shortage of cassettes with recorded programs. The voltage varies, and is sometimes too low. Programs have to be made in many languages. The contents of the few existing programs are often too difficult, or unrelated to the actual situation of the students. Programs should be area-specific, culture-specific, language-specific, and standard-specific, and geared to the students' level.

The students' complained of a lack of materials and equipment for further work such as sewing machines meanwhile the members of the Village Committee were of the view that the syllabus should be seasonal to follow the rhythm of local activities. For instance,

information and knowledge that should be used during the rainy season should be taught well before it. It would also be useful if agricultural guidance and recommendations could be compiled into a book and where writings already exist, translations should be made available for other users in the form of simple booklets. Students' achievement according to the teachers of three centers are summarised in Table 11:1 below.

Table 11:1 Students' Achievement in 3 NFE Centres (India)

Centre I		Centre II		Womens' Centre	
Excellent	4	Excellent	5	Excellent	4
Medium	6	Medium good	3	Medium good	3
Below Average	5	Average	7	Below average	5
		Below average	1		
Total	15	Total	16	Total	12

Although these are but just a few cases, yet, interesting revelations emerge from the data presented. Out of 43 students, 13 (30 per cent) are rated excellent, 19 (44 per cent) are rated average or medium good, and 11 (26 per cent) are rated below average. That means at least 74 per cent of students are rated "average" and above. Naturally, teachers base their rating on different standards, so the result in terms of functionality is probably unreliable. However, the figures seem to indicate a fair degree of motivation among the participants, and a potential for learning that is better than what could be expected, given the poor conditions. There may, however, be an unknown number of drop-outs with undetermined results.

The following explanations for the low performance of the group with learning problems were offered. The main reason was that poor people, especially the young men, have irregular attendance as their first priority is in earning some income on which they can support

themselves. On the other hand, those who are very old are not interested in actually learning to read or write. They go there to listen, with the only practical purpose of picking up new ideas. They are also attracted by the visual media, such as T.V. and cinema where these are available.

*Attendance and drop-out.* If a literacy evening group consists of 30-40 persons in the beginning of a course, sometimes only half remains at the end of a course. Despite variations, attendance among the NFE students follows the agricultural activities. When these are intensive, as in sowing or harvesting, attendance is lower, and vice-versa. This is called "temporary drop-out".

*Teaching aids.* The usual teaching aids are a beginners' reading book, a slate and a piece of chalk. Paper and pencils or pens hardly ever occur. Sometimes there is a very small black-board on the wall. In some cases, posters with advice on agriculture or health are used. Chairs, desks including the teacher's are a rare sight; and in some cases, even blackboards are missing in the NFE Centres. Audio-visual aids seem to be an exceedingly rare occurrence. I believe that portable, light-weight video equipment of the Video 8 type could be very helpful. Of course, costs for purchase and maintenance are prohibitive. Nevertheless, one per village would be very beneficial. I believe that villagers should be encouraged to document their progress in various areas. Such records could serve as excellent instructional programmes for new villages starting development projects.

In a large-scale study carried out by the Swedish National Board of Education in the early 1960s, it was found that students' achievement varied with the training of the teachers (Ekstrand 1962). The better the training, the better were the students' result. However, when poorly trained teachers systematically attended distance radio courses, the results approached those of the trained

teachers. Battery cassette players are now available in India at a reasonable cost. Thus, programmes for the NFE students, as well as certain instructions for the teachers could be produced centrally and distributed to NFE centers. Of course, the programmes would have to be translated to many Indian languages. Such a programme to raise the standard of teaching would be highly cost-effective.

***Bilingualism.*** In most Indian states, there is more than one language. In tribal areas, different ethnic groups speak their own languages. However, the teachers usually speak the language of the state or area. It is also very often claimed that even tribals generally speak the state language and that there is therefore no language problem. But at the seminar with NFE teachers described above, the teachers admitted that there is a wide variation in Oriya fluency among the students, but went on to say that Oriya skills are weak, because the poor have weak association with other people. Bilingualism therefore does seem to constitute a problem which has not yet been systematically studied.

***Motivation among tribals and scheduled castes.*** Among the poor, the motivation for participating in NFE, or for sending their children to school is generally low. Among Hindus, this hesitation is almost totally due to economic conditions, since Hinduism as a culture, traditionally promotes education. Among other tribes however, the situation is different. There are often many kinds of beliefs and superstitions, that may make the parents become biased against schooling until they have experienced the benefits from a development project, and have acquired confidence in the project workers.

***The role of non-formal education.*** As has been discussed above, the NFE Centre is not just a place for basic literacy, but also a place where important group processes take place. Here participants

receive, exchange, digest and elaborate on new information. This process of collective concept formation is most important, for agriculture, for health and hygiene, and in fact for every aspect of community development. Nutritional Education, community health care, disease prevention, for instance, are some topics discussed in the group and in mass meetings. There are also some connections between Formal and Non-Formal Education. Firstly, if parents become literate, they become more motivated to let their children also study. Secondly, as literacy spreads in a community, the members generally become more interested in education.

*The future and importance of NFE for women.* The role of NFE in general as described by Radcliffe & Coletta (1985) states that compared to formal education, visible costs in NFE are usually lower, and that NFE is more flexible, more decentralized in organization, less structured, more task-and-skill-oriented, more learner centred, and more locally specific. Hence NFE is now considered "complementary to, additional to, or even as an alternative to formal education" (*op.cit.* pp. 35-37). For the foreseeable future, NFE will continue to exist in India as the only option for the majority of the people in both the urban and rural areas.

It is now well known that fewer girls start school, and more girls drop out, due to socio-economic conditions than boys, and that girls, more than boys are more burdened with domestic tasks. Of non-enrolled school children, girls constitute 71 per cent in ages 6-14, and 95 per cent of the age 6-11 group (Mellbring *et al.* 1983). In the nine so-called educationally backward states (Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Jammu & Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal) in particular, the illiteracy rate is much higher. These states have 75 per cent of all non-enrolled children in school ages. The illiteracy rate by sex for India in 1961, 1971 and 1981 is given in Table 11:2.

Table 11:2 Illiteracy in Three Decades in India

	1961	1971	1981
Total	70	65	64
Male	58	53	53
Female	88	80	75

Source: National Literacy Mission, Government of India

### Some Concluding Remarks

We have discussed the scope, the practice, and some of the major operational problems related to the NFE programmes in the Indian setting. The problems of methodology, teaching techniques and pupil assessment have also been examined. Questions concerning functionality of the NFE aims and objectives were raised. A number of physical hazards that act to hamper the learner's performance were also outlined along with practical suggestions as to their possible solutions. But most of all, the role of NFE not only as a key factor in rural development, but also as an only option for the poor majority of the people in India is maintained throughout this paper.

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