

10

Illiteracy

Illiteracy in India has, since long before Independence, been regarded as an obstacle to development. It is commonly believed that without substantially eliminating illiteracy, India cannot become a cohesive nation and give to all its citizens the quality of life they have long yearned for. No wonder that education in general and literacy in particular have been accorded a high priority in the country's development process.

How is literacy defined? Who is literate? That person is 'literate' who can read and write some language. The Census Commission in India in 1991 has defined as 'literate' any person who can read and write "with understanding," in any Indian language, and not merely read and write. Those who can read but cannot write are not literate. Formal education in a school is not necessary for a person to be considered as literate.

In a resolution on National Policy on Education adopted in 1968, radical reconstruction of education was proposed so that it involved : (i) a transformation of the system to relate it more closely to the life of the people, (ii) a continuous effort to expand educational opportunity, (iii) a sustained effort to raise the quality of education at all stages, (iv) an emphasis on the development of science and technology, and (v) cultivation of moral and social values. In 1986 stress was laid on the educational policy and the provision of equal opportunities of education to all classes was emphasised.

There has been some progress in the field of education since the 1950s. The number of recognised educational institutions has increased more than three times, that is, from 2.31 lakh in 1951 to 7.55 lakh in

1985. The enrolment of students in the educational institutions has increased more than five and a half times, that is, from 24 million to 132 million in the same period. A little more than a three fold increase has also been registered in the total number of literates, that is, from 16.7% in 1951 to 52.11% in 1991 (*The Hindustan Times*, March 26, 1991). The change in the literacy rates in different years is shown in Table below (literacy rates relate to population aged seven years and above in 1991, but to the total population of the country upto 1981).

Table 10.1: All India Literacy Rates

Year	Population (Millions)	Illiterates (Millions)	Literates (Millions)	Literacy Rate (Percentage)		
				Male	Female	Total
1901	235.1	222.5	12.6	9.8	0.6	5.3
1911	248.2	233.5	14.7	10.6	1.1	5.9
1921	246.7	229.0	17.7	12.2	1.8	7.2
1931	273.4	247.4	26.0	15.6	2.9	9.5
1941	312.0	261.8	50.2	24.9	7.3	16.1
1951	353.1	294.2	58.9	25.0	7.9	16.7
1961	428.0	325.5	102.6	34.4	13.0	24.0
1971	533.5	376.2	157.3	39.5	18.7	29.4
1981	665.3	424.3	241.0	46.9	24.8	36.2
1991	843.9	481.9	362.0	63.8	39.4	52.1

Source: *Frontline*, April 27-May 10, 1991, p. 55 & *The Hindustan Times*, March 26, 1991

If the old definition of the literacy is adopted and the entire population considered, the literacy rate is 42.94% for 1991 compared to 36.23% in 1981 and 29.48% in 1971.

Together with the quantitative expansion of education facilities, there is now a greater emphasis on qualitative as well. Before 1976, education was exclusively the responsibility of the states, the Central Government being concerned only with the coordination and determination of standards in technical and higher education. In 1976, through a Constitutional amendment, education became the joint responsibility of both the Centre and the States. Determined efforts are now being made to achieve the goal of universal elementary education and eradication of illiteracy in the age group 15-35 by 1985. On the one hand, community participation has been planned, and on the other hand a programme named "Operation Blackboard" has been implemented to provide the basic amenities in education in primary schools. Non-

formal education and open learning systems are being encouraged at all levels. However, in the field of removing illiteracy in the country, not much progress could be made due to its huge population. This is evident from the vast magnitude of illiterate persons still found in the country.

Magnitude of Illiteracy

According to the preliminary estimates of the 1991 census, 47.89% people of the total population of India or about 404 million persons are illiterate (*The Hindustan Times*, March 26, 1991). Today, 44 years after Independence, 5 out of every 10 Indians, three out of five women, and eight out of ten tribals and the Scheduled Caste people still cannot read or write. Of the total illiterate people, about 100 million illiterates are in the 15-35 age group which is considered to be the most productive age group, crucial to the task of national reconstruction. This number is constantly on the increase and by the turn of the century the country will have the single largest number of illiterates in the whole world.

The 1991 figures also reveal that Kerala retains its position in literacy by being at the top, Bihar stands at the bottom, with Rajasthan standing close to it. According to the 1991 census, the literacy rates in different states are : Andhra Pradesh : 45.11, Assam : 53.42, Bihar : 38.54, Gujarat : 60.91, Haryana : 55.33, Himachal Pradesh : 63.54, Karnataka : 55.98, Kerala : 90.59, Madhya Pradesh : 43.45, Maharashtra : 63.05, Manipur : 60.96, Meghalaya : 48.26, Mizoram : 81.23, Nagaland : 61.30, Orissa : 48.55, Punjab : 57.14, Rajasthan : 38.81, Sikkim : 56.53, Tamil Nadu : 63.72, Tripura : 60.39, Uttar Pradesh : 41.71, and West Bengal : 57.72 (*Frontline*, April 13-26, 1991).

In terms of the all India ranking in literacy rate, Kerala enjoys the first rank followed by Mizoram, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Gujarat, Nagaland, Tripura, West Bengal, Punjab, Sikkim, Karnataka, Haryana, Assam, Orissa, and Meghalaya. From the other side (that is in terms of the lowest literacy rate), Bihar gets the first rank followed by Rajasthan, Arunachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, (*Frontline*, April 13-26, 1991).

Even though the literacy rate in India has increased from 36.2% in 1981 to 42.9% in 1991 (in accordance with the old definition of literacy), yet in absolute terms, the number of illiterates has increased from 29.42 crore in 1951 to 48.19 crore in 1991. If this high percentage

of illiterates in India is compared with the number of illiterates in other countries, our country appears to be extremely backward. In 1986, the number of illiterates in Russia was almost nil, in United States it was 1.0%, in Italy 3.0%, in China 31.0%, in Egypt 47.0%, in Nigeria 57.0%, in Libya 34.0%, in Brazil 21.0%, in Sri Lanka 13.0%, in Singapore 14.0%, in Yugoslavia 8.0%, and in India, it was 57.0% of the total population (*Saptahik Hindustan*, January 15-21, 1989).

The attainment of the goal of universal elementary education appears to be almost impossible because we are spending only 1.9% of our total annual budget on education in comparison to 19.9% spent by America, 19.6% by Japan, 11.2% by Russia, and 17.8% by France. More details are given in Table 10.2.

The problem of illiteracy among women in our country is worse. It is estimated that in 1991, there are 247.6 million illiterate women in India. The illiteracy percentage among females today is 60.58 in comparison to 36.14 among males. In the urban areas, female illiteracy

Table 10.2: Percentage of Budget Spent on Education (1981)

Country	Budget Spent on Education	Literacy
1 U.S.S.R.	11.2	98.5
2 U.S.A.	19.9	99.5
3 Japan	19.6	99.0
4. England	13.9	99.0
5 France	17.8	97.0
6 Australia	14.8	98.5
7. Canada	17.3	99.0
8. Germany	10.1	99.0
9 India	3.6	36.2
10. Pakistan	2.1	20.7
11. Bangla Desh	2.1	25.8
12 Sri Lanka	3.5	86.5
13 Burma	1.6	65.9
14 Nepal	3.0	23.3
15. Bhutan	1.9	18.0
16. Singapore	N.A.	84.2
17. Egypt	5.5	68.6

Source : Myron Weiner (1991), *The Child and the State in India*, Princeton University Press, p. 159, and *Frontline*, April 27-May 10, 1991, p. 55.

is 52.0% against 34.0% among males. In the rural areas, the female illiteracy rate is 82.0% against 59.0% among males. Rajasthan has the lowest female literacy rate in the country. According to the provisional projections of the 1991 census, the female literacy figure in Rajasthan stood at 20.84%, followed by Bihar with 23.10%, Uttar Pradesh with 26.2%, and Madhya Pradesh with 28.59%. Since in 1981, the female literacy rate in Rajasthan was only 13.99%, during 1981-91 it registered a 6.85% improvement. Bihar improved by 6.59% over the 1981 female literacy percentage of 16.51, Uttar Pradesh by 8.84% over the 1981 figures of 17.18% and Madhya Pradesh by 9.40% over the 1981 figure of 18.99% (*The Hindustan Times*, March 29, 1991). Table 10.3 below gives the comparison of literacy rates among males and females in different states (in 1991 in accordance with the new definition of literacy, that is, population aged seven years and above).

Table 10.3: Literacy Rate in Different States in India (1991)

(in percentage)

States (with population exceeding one crore)	Literacy rate (1991)		
	Total	Males	Females
1. India	52.11	63.86	39.42
2. Andhra Pradesh	45.11	56.24	33.71
3. Assam	53.42	62.34	43.70
4. Bihar	38.54	52.63	23.10
5. Gujarat	60.91	72.54	48.50
6. Haryana	55.33	67.85	40.94
7. Karnataka	55.98	67.25	44.34
8. Kerala	90.59	94.45	86.93
9. Madhya Pradesh	43.45	57.43	28.39
10. Maharashtra	63.05	74.84	50.51
11. Orissa	48.55	62.37	34.40
12. Punjab	57.14	63.68	49.72
13. Rajasthan	38.81	55.07	20.84
14. Tamil Nadu	63.72	74.88	52.29
15. Uttar Pradesh	41.71	55.35	26.02
16. West Bengal	57.72	67.24	47.15

Source : *Census of India*, 1991, Paper I Statement 16, page 67.

The position of illiteracy among children is equally bad. Between 1961 and 1981, roughly five million unschooled children joined the ranks of illiterates every year, swelling to a total which in 1981 stood at

437 million. Considering only those seven years of age and above, the number of illiterates stood at 302 million in 1981 and 324 million (provisional figure) in 1991. The primary school survival rate (that is, per cent completing fifth grade) in India is 38.0% in comparison to 70.0% in China, 64.3% in Egypt, 97.2% in Malaysia, 90.8% in Sri Lanka, and 90.0% in Singapore (Weiner, 1991: 159).

National Policy on Education

The Parliament approved in 1986 the National Policy on Education. It sought a national system of education laying down : (i) a curricular framework to establish comparability of competence at the end of various stages of education all over the country, (ii) reinforcing the integrative aspect of society and culture, and (iii) establishing a value system necessary for an egalitarian, democratic and secular society. The new policy lists the specific steps in such detail that it has been described as nothing less than a charter not only for equality of access to education but also for equalization with regard to the status of the disadvantaged sections of society. It lays down that educational transformation, reduction of disparities, universalization of elementary education, adult education, and scientific and technological research would be accepted as national responsibilities for which adequate resources would be provided.

The concept of the National System of Education implies that upto a given level, all students, irrespective of caste, sex or location, have access to education of a comparable quality. It envisages a common educational structure of 10+2+3 for all parts of the country. The break-up of the first 10 years comprises five years of primary education, three years of upper primary, and two years of high school. Regarding elementary education, the National Policy proposed to ensure that all children who attained the age of 11 years by 1990 will have had five years of schooling through the non-formal stream. Likewise, it proposed that by 1995 all children will be provided free and compulsory education upto 14 years of age.

Regarding eradicating illiteracy, the National Educational Policy 1986 proposed that in the 15-35 age group, a vast programme of adult and continuing education will be implemented through various channels like : (a) establishment of centres in rural areas for continuing education, (b) worker's education through the employers and concerned agencies of the government, (c) radio, television and films as mass and group learning media, (d) creation of learners' groups and

organisations, (e) programmes of distance learning, and (f) organising assistance in self-learning.

The programme of action stipulated that about 40 million persons would be covered under the National Programme of Adult Education by 1990 and another 60 million persons by 1995. The 'careful consideration' of the question of continued illiteracy and the educational policy of the government is evident from the statement given on October 19, 1987 by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi before a Harvard University audience: "I don't think literacy is the key to democracy. Wisdom is much more important. We have seen—and I am not now limiting myself to India, I am going beyond to other countries— literacy sometimes narrows the vision, does not broaden it". It is difficult to say whether the leader of the political party which ruled the country for about four decades was offering a rationale for the policies of doing nothing in the educational arena or was justifying the new educational policy.

Measures Adopted for Eradicating Illiteracy

Broadly speaking, three measures have been adopted for the eradication of illiteracy in our country: (i) National Adult Education Programme, (ii) Rural Literacy Programme, and (iii) National Literacy Mission.

National Adult Education (NAE) Programme

The NAE programme was launched on October 2, 1978 with the aim of providing education and promoting literacy among all illiterate persons, particularly in the age group of 15-35 years. The programme is a joint and collaborative effort of the central government, state governments, union territory administrations, voluntary agencies, universities, colleges and youth centres. The education under the NAE programme is a package which envisages: (i) imparting literacy skills to the target illiterate population, (ii) their functional development, and (iii) creation of awareness among them regarding laws and policies of the government for the efficient implementation of the strategy of redistributive justice. Special emphasis is being placed on the education of women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections of society, who constitute the bulk of illiterate population in India.

UNESCO had declared the year 1990 as the International Literacy Year (ILY). The objective was to generate public awareness about the

need for the relevance of literacy. At the national level, the ILY was launched by the Prime Minister of India at a special function in New Delhi on January 22, 1990. The student and non-student volunteers were asked to muster their collective strength in the noble pursuit of spreading the message of literacy as well as the actual imparting of literacy.

Rural Functional Literacy (RFL) Programme

The RFL programme is a sub-programme of the Adult Education Programme which is fully funded by the Central Government and implemented by the States and union territories. The broad objectives of this programme are, (i) to develop abilities in the learners to read and write, and (ii) to create awareness among the learners about their rights and duties and the benefits they can draw from various schemes of socio-economic development being implemented by the government.

The RFL programme was launched in May, 1986 by involving the NSS and other student volunteers in colleges and universities on the principle of "Each One Teach One". Starting on a modest scale of 2 lakh volunteers, it has gone upto 4.50 lakhs in 1990 covering over 4.20 lakh learners. During 1987, an ambitious programme was adopted involving both students and teachers of schools and colleges with inputs for research studies on the success of the programme. The programme has been designed keeping in view the needs and languages of the learners. The government has selected 40 districts to improve the quality of adult education. It is only after evaluation of the impact that the programme will be taken up in a big way to spread literacy in the minimum possible time.

The process of the Mass Programme of Functional Literacy involves a number of stages. These stages are: selecting master trainers who are to train the student volunteers; selecting, motivating and mobilizing the student volunteers who are genuinely and sincerely committed to literacy work; identifying literate persons in the age group of 15-35 who may be staying in the neighbourhood of an educational institution; forging a link between the student volunteers and the illiterate persons and assigning an area of operation for each volunteer; monitoring of the programme of the student volunteers by senior teachers/headmasters of schools; coordination with various development departments/agencies by way of visits of functionaries to the place where the volunteer is imparting literacy, telling the learners about the advantages of being literate, making available charts, posters and other materials to the

learners and identifying genuine difficulties of the learners; and providing post-literacy activities for the non-literates through libraries and reading rooms. Coverage and support by the media and evaluation of the overall impact of the programme through University Departments of Adult and Continuing Education is of crucial importance.

National Literacy Mission

In accordance with the directives of the National Policy on Education and the implementation strategies envisaged in the Programme of Action, the government formulated a comprehensive programme known as National Literacy Mission (NLM) in the field of adult education. The NLM was launched by Rajiv Gandhi (at that time Prime Minister of India) in May 1988 to achieve the goal of imparting 'functional literacy' to 80 million illiterate persons in the 15-35 age group—30 million by 1990 and an additional 50 million by 1995. The Mission, thus, aimed at achieving 80.0% literacy in 1995 in comparison to 36.0% in 1981. The NLM aimed at involving the youth and voluntary agencies in the programme. In 1990, there was 513 projects in operation in various states and union territories. Likewise, presently there are 500 voluntary agencies working in the field. In addition, *Shramik Vidyapeeths* and 16 state resource centres are functioning in different states to cater to the workers' education and to provide technical resource support to the programme.

Evaluation of Measures Undertaken

The attempts made by the government upto 1965 for eradicating illiteracy could not succeed possibly because the nation then was pre-occupied with problems of food, employment and self-reliance. Besides, due to the increase in population also, the number of illiterates in the country progressively increased from 30 crore in 1951 to 44 crore in 1981. In 1991, however, the number came down to 40.41 crore. The Functional Literacy programme was expected to lower the rate of infant mortality, reduce the number of school drop-outs, improve health, produce better environmental conditions, create awareness of rights, help neo-literates acquire skills to improve their economic standing, motivate them to adopt small family norms and better the status of women. But have we been able to make any dent in the situation?

The main criticism is that the adult education movement does not have the support from the grassroots. The planning is more at the state level and there is nothing yet like a detailed programme of action district by district, village by village, and area to area, with weak areas and difficult problems carefully identified and provided for and resources firmly assured. Much time has been spent on pedagogy and local and regional invocations and freedom of choice have been effectively discouraged (Tarlok Singh : March, 1991). Instead of welcoming all the available options, including the so-called 'centre' approach, 'each one teach one' or 'each one teach many', the concerned central agency puts increasing obstacles in the way of voluntary and local agencies bringing learners together into 'centres' and imparting to them both literacy and other skills and socially useful knowledge. Our country does not have a coherent and well-worked out plan of action which will unite the centre and states, local bodies and voluntary organisations and constructive workers in a cumulative, all-embracing national effort.

As if the past failures are not warning enough, the Ramamurti Committee has also put the clock further back. In its Perspective Paper on Education presented in September, 1990, the Committee observed: "In the case of adults, inability to read and write has not necessarily meant lack of education". The intention perhaps is not to romanticise illiteracy but rather to underscore the need to redesign adult education programme meaningfully. But the committee, in its full report entitled "Towards an Enlightened and Human Society" submitted in December 1990, has not offered any meaningful scheme of work. It merely recommended that after the Eighth Five Year Plan, an independent study group should evaluate the programme now under way and propose appropriate strategies to remove adult illiteracy in the quickest possible time. The Committee further recommended that "the evaluation may also look into the various alternative models and study their relevance with respect to diverse socio-cultural and political conditions in different parts of India. The minimum objective of this study should be to find out on objective basis what approaches do not yield results, so that, at least those models may not be encouraged". Does this not show that the Ramamurti Committee's report leaves one with a feeling of utter dismay?

The Ramamurti Report further recommended that adult education programmes could be successful only when the other basic needs were linked simultaneously. These needs were defined as: health, nutrition,

housing and employment. In fact, the report stressed upon the suggestion that instead of starting literacy programmes, other basic needs be made 'aware' of. The second suggestion was that adult literacy models which failed to have the desired impact in five years ought to be scrapped. Knowing fully well the importance of work and nutrition, could it be said that the adult literacy programme should be postponed till we achieve the targets of employment, nutrition ...?

And, now we have a fresh controversy. A suggestion was given by the University Grants Commission's ex-Chairman, Professor Yashpal to close down universities and colleges for one year so as to involve teachers and students in a campaign for literacy. This suggestion was discussed by the vice-chancellors of various universities in a meeting held at Delhi on March 8, 1991 organised by the Association of Indian Universities in cooperation with the Planning Commission. They suggested that literacy be made a component of college and university curriculum and students be involved in literacy programmes during summer holidays. This suggestion deserves to be seriously considered.

Students remain free after their examinations for three to four months from mid-April to mid-July. During *Dassehra* vacations in August and winter vacations in December, school and college/university work is not so demanding and rural adults also have relatively free time. There are some 80 holidays in a year in schools and colleges. Adding 60 to 75 days of vacations, the total period in a year for which the students remain free comes to about 150 days or five months. If the holidays are made flexible to suit the convenience of the rural populace and if students devote about two months out of these five months in making illiterates literate and if credits are awarded to students for involving themselves in literacy programmes, removing illiteracy in a period of five years or so may not be difficult. Of course, suspending teaching for a year for national regeneration is an impractical and wasteful suggestion. When academic sessions in several universities are already behind schedule because of one or the other agitation, foregoing a year's academic life to participate in literacy programmes will be unacceptable to students and their parents. A shorter time frame like the summer vacation would be more feasible.

Besides the above critical evaluation of the literacy programmes, we may also identify the following hurdles in the successful implementation of the adult education programme (Sood, 1988: 4).

(1) Though the literacy programme was supposed to have the three dimensions of literacy awareness and functionality but in practice the programme has tended to become mainly a literacy programme, as most of the adult education centres are the least equipped to deal with the other two basic components of AEP. The adults find no incentive in going to these centres as they do not consider these programmes useful in the context of their environmental needs.

(2) The important factors which prevent adult illiterates from going to centres are: time constraint, economic pressures, fatalistic attitude nurtured by centuries of enslavement and exploitation, lack of leisure, family resistance geographical distance, absence of material incentives, negative attitude towards women's literacy and unawareness of the programme.

(3) Lack of commitment, interest and missionary zeal among key functionaries entrusted with the task of implementation of the programme pose a major challenge to the successful implementation of AEP.

(4) The threat posed by the vested interests has also negatively affected the programme, as it may deprive them of the cheap labour or potential vote banks. Therefore, veiled resistance and implicit indifference to the programme from a sizeable section of the community are stumbling blocks in the path of popularizing the programme.

(5) The programme's effectiveness is also impaired due to some practical difficulties like over-emphasis on rules, voluntary agencies not receiving cooperation from state governments, absence of coordination among various agencies, lack of effective support from mass media, poor quality of training of functionaries, absence of proper evaluation, and lack of support by Panchayati Raj institutions in a sustained manner.

Tapping the Student Power

Using the students in literacy campaign is tapping the student power for pulling the country out of its existing stagnation. The largest chunk of illiterates is in the Hindi belt (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh) where according to the latest Operation Research Group (ORG) report, more than 80% adults (15 years plus) are illiterate (against the present national average of 48%). If on an experimental basis, student services are used during the vacations in these states and if in return weightage is given to the

students in the admission to engineering, medical and technical institutions, the experiment might provide a model to the universities to adopt a 'neighbourhood approach' in carrying out literacy campaigns. The task is daunting and requires the most ingenuous efforts and dedication, but it can be managed by human competence. The programme has to be time-bound and it should be low cost. The students have to devote 2-3 hours a day for two months in teaching the illiterates. The cost per learner for the entire instruction (including teaching and learning material) should not exceed Rs. 15, which can easily be afforded by a poor country like ours. The motivation for the student instructors has to come in the form of weightage in passing examinations and in getting admissions in educational institutions of their choice. Knowing the vast number of students in higher secondary schools, in colleges and in universities, millions of students can be used for teaching groups of 10 learners each, and, thus, carrying the torch of literacy to millions of illiterate adults. The young students with drive and commitment can move mountains, if given responsibility and a feeling of trust and confidence.

Efforts by Voluntary Organisations

The government alone cannot solve the vast problem of illiteracy in the country. It is not possible to achieve the objective of total eradication of illiteracy entirely through governmental efforts. The government can undoubtedly take cognizance of the situation, can identify the agencies, institutions and individuals, can act as a catalytic agent to provide human, material and financial resources, but the government cannot promote literacy all by itself. The efforts of the government—both central and state—therefore, will have to be supplemented and strengthened by voluntary organisations and individuals who have a positive perception and commitment.

World Literacy of Canada (WLC) is one such voluntary organisation engaged in promoting adult literacy in the developing world with the help of local community-based organisations. Till date, the WLC has supported 26 literacy projects in India including the famous Literacy House in Lucknow. The South Asian Partnership (SAP) along with WLC has also proposed projects for women's adult education in backward states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. The SAP, in collaboration with 36 NGOs involved with sustainable development, is hopeful that one million women will be literate by 2000 A.D.

If adult literacy is necessary, a child's education is an urgent national priority. Article 45 of our Constitution refers to "endeavour to provide by 1960 free and compulsory education for all children until they reach 14 years of age". While many state governments claim to have enacted compulsory education laws but in practice, no state has implemented such a law, that is, requiring local authorities to compel school attendance. In fact, instead of talking of 'compulsory' education, the decision-makers now talk of 'universal' education. Even the New Educational Policy of 1986 gives concrete expression to the shift away from the goal of compulsory schooling. Elementary education is now 'universalized' and not 'compelled'. The educational restructuring and the 'new' policy now focuss on 'incentives' like free school meals, free uniforms, free books and skill-oriented teaching. Of the estimated 82 million Indian children in the 6-14 age-group, less than half attend school. Of every 10 children who enter the first grade, only four complete four years of schooling. By shrugging off its duty to educate children, our society and our government are in effect denying the experience of childhood, that is, of play, experimentation, and self-discovery to millions of children. Retreat from the formal commitment to mandatory full-time schooling has unmistakably been a retrogressive step in economic development as well as in reducing the problem of child labour in the country.

It may be concluded that the tasks of making some 400 million people literate, of persuading the parents of about 42 million children in the 6-14 age group to send their children to schools and of giving incentive to the parents of 74% children who enter primary school to complete the fifth grade (only 26% children complete primary education in India before leaving the school) are indeed daunting and require ingenious efforts and a high degree of motivation on the part of both the learners and the instructors. Such a serious problem of illiteracy calls for drastic measures rather than the half-hearted approaches we have so sedulously pursued all these years without tangible results. Mass illiteracy and child education have to be tackled on a war footing because of the sheer magnitude of the problem.