

#### **(4) Literacy Education in India, a Host Country of the Capacity Building Workshop**

#### **(3) Literacy Crash Course: An Experience with Tribal Women**

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##### **1. Introduction**

The present prevalent programmes of literacy are based on provision of some opportunities for tribal for adult literacy with an emphasis on a mass-system approach and not on how learners see literacy. This case study of a Literacy Crash Course which was conducted by myself and three village colleagues for women of Kotra Development Block, our field area, is an alternative selective approach which systematically involves the learners, both in planning and in being a part of the process. The Kotra Block in the Udaipur District, which is located in the state of Rajasthan, India, is an area inhabited by tribal (86%) and the literacy rate is 1.5% for the female and 10% for the male population.

ASTHA has been working in Kotra Development Block since September 1986. The main objective of our work is to initiate a process of development through organization and education. We believe that people have the power to think about, understand and take action on the problems of their world. Through our efforts we have created opportunities for people to come together and learn, reflect, analyze their problems and seek out ways and means to solve them.

With this process, the initial work has been related to several issues of exploitation during a drought period and later, training camps were organized with an emphasis on awareness-raising, leadership and creating understanding about different development projects. Other types of training camps were, among others, on backyard poultry, health, self-help credit societies and administration.

##### **2. Background of the learners**

During this process, many women who started taking a leadership role in the villages realized that illiteracy is a handicap in fulfilling their group leadership responsibilities. They are able to discuss and analyze but when

they needed to work and take action in their development programmes, they needed literacy skills. This need was talked about in our monthly meetings; hence a literacy course was planned.

The learners who came for this literacy class were from several women's groups in our field area. These women had taken leadership in their areas on several issues and actions. They were motivated as they were facing problems in their work situation - whether it was small poultry unit management, or operating the self-help credit society's account or any other work in relation to preparing applications for the Block Development Officer, Police etc. The age group of the learners ranged from 19 years to 50 years. They had no previous experience in literacy except that one woman's husband was a literacy teacher.

It was clear to us that they had neither the regular time to attend a literacy class as a daily wage earner nor the interest in learning and mastering literacy skills for months, other than reaching a level they could use in their work. Hence a crash course on literacy evolved. Discussions were held in relation to when the women would be free for 9-10 days without affecting their house and/or work. This was important because many of them supplement their family income by working as wage laborers and collectors of minor forest produce.

##### **3. Our Preparations**

We were interested in a 9 - 10 day course because we were keen to let them learn basic alphabets and numbers so that they could start reading simple words and sentences at the end of this course as well as doing simple addition and subtraction.

We were also hoping that through this we could inspire so much interest in them that they might become continuous learners. In preparing for this residential course, an important consideration was preparation of a place to study and stay. We knew that some women would be bringing their children, so the accommodation was close enough to the study area for supervision by the mother. We made the two places close enough so that learning could go on any time of the day. We were also interested in enabling informal and mutual learning to take place among the participants.

While preparing for the literacy class, I was trying to look for a possible primer but I found that most of the words in prepared primers used to initiate learning were not words which would be understood in the first place by these women without any help. In addition, the women were coming from communities where the literacy environment was minimal. Most of the women coming to the course lived at least 50 - 1,000 kilometers

from any big town or city and their Hindi vocabulary (regional as well as national language) was not very large.

Being an adult educator who believes that an adult is a self-directed learner who learns what is meaningful to him or her, I thought of creating a primer along with the learners. The curriculum for the 10 day literacy course was planned in terms of reading and writing all alphabets using the analytical method, using pictures, people and objects. Numeric targets were: leaning numbers up to 100, writing the numbers up to 50 and learning simple addition and subtraction. We would review these objectives as we went along.

In preparation we collected a lot of old pictures from the each-one-teach-one primer of Rajasthan Adult Education Association, Jaipur. We cut out words from magazines, and purchased plastic numbers and alphabets etc. We put pictures around the classroom without any words. Most of these pictures were of women involved in several tasks, including reading and writing. As one of the objectives was to prepare young village people to be innovative literacy teachers, three young people were invited to help and learn how participatory literacy leaning can happen through a camp approach.

#### **4. The Course Starts**

The course was joined by 16 tribal women. To establish a rapport and create an informal atmosphere, the programme started with a song by the participants.

I wanted to let them feel that the leaning would be interesting and exciting, but demanding. We started the first session by recalling our childhood encounters with school, but with the exception of two women, who had no experience of school. Many had some relatives who were literate. Many knew that reading and writing were important, but it was an unknown field.

Then I played a game called 'name-game.' With a big marker I wrote on small cards the name of each person and asked them to memorize their name by size and shape. Everyone was then asked to put the card in a pile. Then each woman was called on to search for her name card. Surprisingly, many were able to recognize it on the first try, but others took some time. The women enjoyed the game and in the process were made aware that with a small effort they would be able to read.

#### **4. Learning to Read**

To teach reading, I used the concept of 'simple to complex' and chose abstract symbols close to their reality. This was done by choosing 5 words consisting of all the Hindi vowels. The words were close to their reality. The

words chosen corresponded with pictures. Out of these five words, one needed to be explained because, in their dialect, it was spoken differently. First we associated the word with the picture. Then the whole word was recognized as a word with certain sounds (Hindi is a phonetic language). The word was broken into the sounds of the letter and a whole exercise of association of sound and letter was done using chalk and board. The analytical process was helpful in associating the letters with the sounds. As adults, the women were able to grasp meaning in abstract symbols.

To make the process more interesting, the whole group was broken into three small groups. Each group was provided with a set of plastic alphabets. A recognition exercise was conducted to let people recognize and read the letters just learned. Then once the learners were ready to recognize the letters, an exercise to understand the use of vowel was planned with the consonants. This was done dramatically because vowels do create interesting changes in the consonant sounds! Later construction of new words was done through the learned letters. This was an interesting exercise, although for quite some time, people were unable to see its objective. Once it became clear, however, it was an enjoyable exercise.

#### **5. Learning to Write Letters and Numbers**

Learning to write began after two days, and we started with leaning to write numbers. We found that all the women conceptually knew numbers up to 10. Some of them knew up to 30 though they had not gone to school. This knowledge helped us to organize our teaching in numeric. The task was to let them recognize the shapes of the numbers with their place (sequence) value. Once this recognition was done, all we needed to do was to teach them how to write the numbers.

In teaching writing, we wanted first to help them to control digital muscles, as most of them may not have used a pencil or pen before. Hence an exercise using the finger over big letters was done time and again along with memorization of the letters. We then broke each letter into recognizable shapes resembling something they knew. The same was done with numbers, e.g. a spade resembles the number '7' or '1' resembles a staff. Similar exercises were done with all the nine numbers and 0. The same symbolic relations were made with the Devnagari script letters.

#### **6. Other Learning**

Further learning of alphabets was done using the names of the participants and objects of daily use with which

that they can easily associate. For example, using one woman's name 'HARMI' we could teach the letters 'H,' 'R,' 'M.' Similarly in showing a Pen, we were able to teach 'P' and 'N.' This process helped us to create our own Primer.

As we were working close to 10 hours a day, taking breaks for tea, lunch and rest were done. The approaches varied: working with the whole group, in small groups, and as individuals. Variety was the key idea. There were times when the memorization or practice of writing a letter 15 times was quite boring for women who are used to working mainly outdoors. To change the mood we made two/three visits to places of interests during the course. Such opportunities were needed to break the monotony of practice sessions. Similarly if we were reading as a whole group, then a small group activity followed, making new words or individual work in writing. We also used some educational games but without much result.

We were successful in making it a living and learning experience, because we found that the women took their own time to work together before sessions or in the night. The group was certainly intent upon learning. We also created a song related to vowels and consonants used, to help remember letters through shape as described in the song. This song was based on the tune of a local folk song. This song was later incorporated in the primer.

At the end of 10 days we were able to learn all alphabets and numbers up to 30. Writing was coming along slowly, but some developed good handwriting. This was a surprise. Two participants started reading slowly and writing their names and home address. The primer was enough to carry on with further work independently.

As a follow-up, we talked about how to keep in touch even while working at home. We gave them self-addressed postcards. It was agreed that the women would try and read at least an hour a day and identify one person who could help them in times of difficulty. As the primer was developed with all the participants, the sequence was known to all so that even if the women forgot, she could figure out the letter through song, visual and sequence cues.

## 7. Follow-up

This first camp was a leaning experience for the women as well as for myself. As a follow-up, we wrote letters in simple short sentences, and we did receive postcards from the women. Some were written by them or they asked somebody to write and they copied it. The second camp was set up after one month. We

met again for 5 days. The most interesting thing was that with one exception most of the participants had spent time studying, if not daily, then at least every two or three days.

They had also sought help from someone, either a relative or other outsider. The emphasis in the second camp was to revise what was learned in reading, writing and numeric and to learn numbers up to 100 and simple addition and subtraction. We also tried simple things such as home address, family tree, members of the women's group, as well as how to read the clock or watch. In this camp, we found that two women were way ahead of the others and 50% were average and the other 50% were below average. We gave them new materials to read and planned another follow-up camp.

Since the second camp we have started a system of correspondence sheets to review what they had learned. We have received these sheets back, which are heartening: their interest is continuing. Now we are planning the third camp with a view to teaching how to use reading/writing/numeric in the tasks they need to perform as group leaders in relation to the post office, bank, block office, etc.

Keeping minutes of meetings, writing applications, and reading wage labor records will be used as course material. This phase should provide further solidification of the literacy and numeric skills.

## 8. What We Learned

The course has provided some interesting insights in terms of planning, organizing and administering a literacy programme as follows:

- (1) Poor people's struggle for survival makes it impossible for them to attend a regular literacy class in the evening in their villages. However, they have certain periods when they are relatively free. This provides the opportunity for crash literacy camps.
- (2) The literacy camp needs to be planned with people who are part of the programme. The place, time, duration need to be discussed with them and established based on mutual convenience. This process reduces the anxiety of the teacher about their attendance.
- (3) One of the key problems of many literacy programmes - 'motivation to learn' was not present among the participants at the crash camp. This was not only because they were partners in planning but also because they were selected because they were leaders and part of the integrated development programme of ASTHA.
- (4) The concept of living and leaning together was important as it created an atmosphere to learn. In

most cases where there is no literate environment, going for a short period to attend a literacy class may not be conducive to learning. Also being with others who were in a similar situation helped to create motivation. Mutual learning happens in an unplanned way.

- (5) The learning programme should be a well thought-out process keeping the adult learners background in mind and developing teaching methods based on principles of adult learning.
- (6) We also realized that in this type of crash programme setting, there was a need for a creative and innovative teacher who could use things from the environment rather than depending on prepared materials. (This may also be necessary in other literacy classes, particularly where the language and the life situations are different from the prepared materials.)
- (7) The use of exercises and variety of experiences to provide practice is important, because the simple repetitive process of memorization is a boring task. Also, most of the village people are not used to sitting for long hours. Hence, there should be a variety in the learning tasks, involving them in different ways.
- (8) Even though there was generally high motivation to learn, there were times when many women had low motivation because of slow progress, or a fight on some personal issue, etc. At such periods, the role of the teacher was very crucial.
- (9) The duration of the camp should be long enough so that a significant self-learning process can be started. This is very important. Similarly, a follow-up should be built in because the women's daily lives do not automatically make room for literacy.
- (10) As most of the learners are alone and without any support after they leave the camp, the suggestion of finding someone in the family or neighborhood to help them was useful. This prevented them from forgetting what they had learned. Similarly, to maintain contact with the teacher in whatever form (e.g. correspondence) was important.
- (11) It was important to have support trainers, not only to learn the methods but to work in the small groups' reading and writing practice sessions. They also helped to develop the learning sessions more creatively. The camp is an intensive experience for all, and would be too much of an educational, emotional, planning, management load for one trainer along, although the number of learners may not be very large.

that such a crash course in the format of a camp is a viable learning programme in literacy. Recently there was a demand from male group leaders to start such a course for them. This makes us feel that this approach to literacy is a perceived need of the people of the area.

\* ASTHA is an NGO working among tribal of the Kotra Development Block, southeast of Rajasthan State, India.

## 9. Conclusion

As the process is still continuing, the final shape will emerge in due course but the effect to date confirms