
Social and Economic Consequences of Illiteracy

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Abstract: Illiteracy means the lack of Reading, Writing and Arithmetic (3R's) skills. It is the lack of minimum capabilities needed to function effectively in a society. According to H.M. Philips "an illiterate person has hundred enemies such as epidemics, hunger, disorder, humiliation and many others". Therefore, illiteracy is a curse to humanity. As the socio-economic condition of a nation mainly depends upon the education of its general people, illiteracy must be removed by any means. Unfortunately, India has got a quite unsatisfactory socio-economic condition due to the high rate of illiteracy among her people. About 25 percent of population is still illiterate in India. This can be a threat to a democratic country of 21st century. It is because dissemination of knowledge is the motto of today's society. Hence, there is an urgent need to identify the various consequences that are caused by illiteracy so that we can motivate each and every individual to join their hands together to eliminate illiteracy from the Indian democratic society. This paper is an attempt to focus on the social and economic consequences of illiteracy in India.

Keywords: *Illiteracy, Socio-economic development, consequences, Democracy.*

Introduction:

The super structure of human civilization is built on the foundation of literacy. The impact of literacy on socio-economic development is positive and can be easily determined by comparing the standard of living, per capita income, Gross Domestic Product, industrialization and development of infrastructure within a country. Literacy enhances the working capabilities of people by providing them with skill development. Literacy and socio-economic development have endless companionship.

Unfortunately, socio-economic condition of our country is quite unsatisfactory due to the high rate of illiteracy among the people. H.M. Philips also noted that an illiterate person has hundred enemies such as epidemics, hunger, disorder, humiliation and many others. Thus, illiteracy is a curse to humanity. To reduce the high rate of illiteracy, several schemes of education have been launched in India from the time of independence. Despite all these strenuous efforts, literacy rate of our country is still in a negligible stage. According to census 2011 the female literacy rate is only 65.46 percent against 82.14 percent of the male literacy rate. This high rate of illiteracy among the masses is the only factor that responsible for low socio-economic development of our country. Hence, there is a need to identify the various consequences that are caused by illiteracy. This paper mainly focuses on the social

and economic consequences of illiteracy in India.

The Concept of Illiteracy

In 1948, the acquisition of a broad range of skills was officially recognized as a fundamental aspect of human rights and personal fulfilment. These skills include reading, writing and numeracy (UNESCO, 2006). Ten years later, at the UNESCO General Conference in Paris, the term „illiterate“ was defined as someone who is unable to read and write a simple statement about his or her daily life. Illiteracy may be analyzed at different levels, through complementary indicators. (a) Complete illiteracy is defined as the lack of the most basic reading and writing skills. Completely illiterate persons can neither read nor write. A proxy indicator of this variable is not having attended or graduated from at least the first year of primary education (zero years of schooling). This can be estimated individually, using census and survey data. It can also be estimated at an aggregate level, by studying different age groups on the basis of information from the educational system, analyzing the relationship between enrolment levels, graduation rates, failure rates and withdrawals from school and the size of the cohort of first-grade entrants for a given year. (b) Functional Illiteracy is the lack of minimum capabilities needed to function in society has no fixed parameters, in as much as there is no consensus regarding what those capabilities are, aside from reading and writing. Complete illiteracy means a person cannot read or write at all. Of equal relevance is the concept of functional illiteracy, which means an individual may have basic reading, writing and numerical skills but cannot apply them to accomplish tasks that are necessary to make informed choices and participate fully in everyday life. During the second half of the twentieth century, as formal education became widespread and major literacy campaigns got underway, the concept of illiteracy began to change. In the mid-1960s, the concept of functional illiteracy began to gain acceptance, and literacy objectives became more complex, shifting toward the acquisition and development of the communication skills needed to participate in social life and production.

UNESCO defines functional illiteracy as “measured by assessing reading, writing and mathematical skills in the various domains of social life which influence individual identity and insertion into society. From this perspective, literacy involves not only reading and writing but also the acquisition of the skills necessary for effective and productive performance within society”.

The Consequences of Illiteracy

Recent research in the fields of psychology; nutrition and neuroscience suggest that the first five years of life are critical to the development of intelligence, personality and social

behavior. It is during this period that millions of cells are born, grow and become interconnected. When this process of growth, development and interconnection does not take place adequately, child development is negatively affected (UNESCO, 2004). The World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien, 1990) states that education begins at birth and continues throughout life. Consequently, the social effects of illiteracy are present throughout the entire life cycle. During early childhood, the effects of illiteracy can be seen within the family unit and the primary socialization process. Later, during adulthood, illiteracy affects an individual's social position, income and cultural capital.

Illiteracy and the Life Cycle

Adult illiteracy increases present and future socioeconomic vulnerability, and is a significant factor in the reproduction of such vulnerability through children, passing from generation to generation. Its effects are present throughout life. While the needs and requirements of education may vary over the course of a lifetime, they never disappear. This should be borne in mind when studying possible prevention and mitigation initiatives for a given population (ECLAC, 2006).

The main consequences of illiteracy during the various stages of life are as under:

Adult Illiteracy during the Pre-School Years- Poor education during early childhood compromises the synaptic process, the development of higher brain functions and the learning of language, communication codes and social and emotional development, among other factors. "If children lack informed and stimulated families, communities, health services and education, among other environmental factors during this phase of their development, they not only miss crucial development opportunities, but also risk permanent developmental damage" (Consejo de la Infancia, 2006).

Adult Illiteracy During School Years- The school years are essential, providing a minimum of social integration and making possible the acquisition of values, habits and knowledge which provide a sense of belonging to society. When parents have low expectations and participate little in the schooling of their children, the latter are more likely to perform poorly, have low grades, repeat school years and even drop out of formal education. Moreover, economic necessity drives poor youths to leave school in larger numbers, since they must help support their families, and are forced to accept second-rate, low-quality jobs. Hence, their income is low, not only due to the type of work they perform, but also because they lack formal employment contracts. Parental commitment and involvement are therefore essential during a person's school years. If young people fail to appreciate the intellectual and economic value of education, they will be more inclined to leave the educational system.

Parents must play a key role. They must use their own experience and educational capital to help their children understand the importance of education, and they must ensure that their children place education before work, since illiteracy increases risk rather than reducing it.

Illiteracy during Adulthood- Illiterate adults face serious employability issues, given their low level of knowledge and expertise. This is attributable to a lack of formal schooling, caused either by an early departure from school to enter the labour market or the loss over time of the ability to read and write. In addition, illiterate persons have little awareness of their rights and duties, and may thus be inclined to accept precarious, low quality employment contracts.

This increases the likelihood of remaining in poverty. Completion of 12 years of schooling (i.e., finishing secondary education) provides an 80% chance of earning an income high enough to escape poverty (ECLAC, 1997). Adult illiteracy not only affects income and awareness of rights, but also leads to poor nutrition and health. The daily diet of adults is adopted by their children, who learn by example. Eating habits may reduce or exacerbate nutritional risk, breaking or perpetuating the vicious circle of malnutrition (ECLAC, 2006).

Social Consequences of Illiteracy- Illiterate persons face greater obstacles in terms of social insertion, not only on a personal level (social inclusion difficulties, precarious work, high rates of disease, etc.), but also within the family (child nutrition, hygiene, health and schooling, among others) and at a societal level (lower productivity, high health care costs). The social consequences of adult illiteracy can be divided into the following categories: health, education, social integration and cohesion.

Effects on Health- Research have also shown that illiteracy limits knowledge and practices necessary for self-care, particularly among women. This has a negative impact on household health, hygiene and nutrition (UNESCO, 2006). The effects of illiteracy on health can be divided into the following categories: consequences in the home, consequences in the workplace and consequences in sexual and reproductive behaviour.

Health at home: Several studies have shown the impact of illiteracy on the health awareness of mothers. Indeed, illiterate persons, particularly mothers, are more likely to adopt inadequate nutritional and hygiene practices in their homes. Literate women, or women who are participating in literacy programmes, possess better skills and follow better health practices than their illiterate counterparts. They also have better access to preventive health measures, such as vaccination and medical check-ups, among others (UNESCO, 2006; Burchfield, Hua, Iturry and Rocha, 2002). Research by Burchfield's team (2002) in Bolivia found that literacy programmes have a significant impact on the acquisition of health-related

habits and knowledge. Araujo (1999), Desai and Soumya (1998) report that, as mothers acquire more years of schooling, their ability to acquire knowledge that improves the nutrition of their children increases. In this regard, if a mother or her children are not treated in time, disease may progress or even lead to death. Robinson Pant (2006) estimates that child mortality decreases by 9% for every additional year of schooling attained by the mother. In short, the health benefits of literacy have been documented by a growing number of longitudinal studies, which also show that the impact of adult literacy programmes may be even stronger than that of formal education (The EFA Global Monitoring Report Team, 2005).

Occupational health: Illiterates suffer from a high occupational accident rate (ECLAC, 2005), since they do not understand written instructions for the operation of machinery which puts their own health and that of co-workers at risk. Failure to use safety equipment increases not only the risk of accident, but also of work related illnesses. This increases the need for medical services (and the accompanying costs), on the one hand, and causes job absenteeism, on the other. In short, illiteracy raises the risk of inadequate occupational hazard prevention practices.

Sexual and reproductive health: Disinformation is one of the most significant problems of illiteracy. Among other things, illiteracy increases the likelihood of high risk sexual behaviour, due to lack of awareness regarding sexual and reproductive health, as well as inadequate use of contraception. Schooling helps prevent the spread of the disease, providing reliable information on AIDS and encouraging the adoption of protective practices (Schenker, 2005). Unawareness of contraceptive methods increases the likelihood of adult and adolescent pregnancy. Studies by Cochrane (1989) and McMahon (2000) have shown that the birth rate declines only among those who have completed primary school or higher levels of education.

Effects on Education

Children of parents who have failed to complete primary education are highly unlikely to complete primary or secondary education themselves. Carneiro, Meghir and Parey (2007) note that, the greater a mother's schooling, the fewer behavioural problems her children will exhibit, and the lower their repetition rate will be. Comings, Shrestha and Smith (1992) and Shultz (1993, cited in UNESCO, 2006) have shown that literate parents are more likely to be able to help their children in concrete terms, for example, by meeting with their teachers and talking to their children about their academic performance.

Poor families often give more importance on earning than education due to the opportunity cost of the latter. The pressing need to work, in order to supplement their families, is the

chief cause of school dropout among young people. Moreover, the temptation to leave school is increased by the perception that those who complete their education are not rewarded with wages and job prospects. Poor youths are more inclined to leave school as a result (Marinho, 2007).

Effects on Social Cohesion

The links between education and society are strong and mutually reinforcing (UNESCO, 2005). In modern societies, “literacy skills are fundamental to informed decision-making, to active and passive participation in local, national, and global social life, and to the development and establishment of a sense of personal competence and autonomy” (Stromquist, 2005). Literacy enables them to actively promote the collective rights which are essential to human dignity. Illiterate persons suffer from low self-esteem, are less independent and have less ability for critical reflection (UNESCO, 2006). When asked why they chose to learn to read, write and manage their finances, participants in literacy programmes have replied that they wish to become more autonomous, gain control over everyday situations and “avoid being cheated” (Lind, 1996, cited in UNESCO, 2006).

The democratic process requires active participants. Without a population that is aware of and struggles for its rights and organizes itself in political parties, unions and a broad range of civic organizations, it is impossible to develop adequate public policies that benefit the population as a whole and strengthen the rule of law (Entreculturas, 2007). Several studies have shown that persons who have participated in literacy programmes are more politically involved than illiterate persons. This includes union activities, community activities, and greater willingness to become registered voters, greater willingness to effectively participate in elections and local associations and increased participation in general elections, as in the case of Turkey, where literacy programme participants voted in larger numbers than illiterates. Literacy thus provides citizens with access to information they can use to participate in the socio-political life of their community, both locally and nationally, and allows them to express their views.

Economic Consequences of Illiteracy

As noted above, one of the most convincing arguments in favour of human resource development is the fact that literacy and increased schooling improve productivity and drive economic growth. Over the last few decades, knowledge has become the key ingredient of the new production paradigm, and education has become an essential factor in the modernization of production systems and the economic behaviour of individuals. If income gaps are to be reduced, the coverage and quality of educational systems must be improved.

Education is one of the key determinants of individual income, not only because it naturally improves or increases personal productivity, but also because it improves the information available to individuals regarding the challenges they must face in society (the marketplace). It also increases social mobility (Riveros, 2005). Hence, education influences a worker's standing in the occupational hierarchy and the ability to find employment. Schooling and training are the variables which exert the strongest influence on the occupational hierarchy (Schmelkes & Ahuja, 2000). Young people who fail to complete primary school have a lower chance of obtaining jobs of sufficient quality to avoid poverty (Goicovic, 2002).

Conclusion

For the better economic development it is more important to strengthen the pillar of literacy. It requires strategic planning and financial resources to facilitate the literacy programs. The financial resources required for the development of literacy programs may not be considered as expense; in fact it is an investment which gives fruitful results in future. The strategic planning required for the development of literacy programs is the part of economic planning. The stronger the economic planning is the better the result will be. From an analytical point of view the economic prosperity and literacy are the two directly proportional procedures which have a great influence on each other. As a country's workforce is educated, skilled, organized, competitive and wanting to go ahead, no one can stop such an economy from being prosperous. Concisely economic development depends on the qualitative workforce and this qualitative workforce can be acquired by developing professional, social and communication skills through literacy and education. As the people of a country are literate they will work much better for their own and as they will work to satisfy their needs, simultaneously country's economy will grow and develop.

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