

‘ISSUE BASED LITERACY’ METHOD IN PRACTICE: RELATING LIFE AND LITERACY LEARNING, AWARENESS AND ACTION – some personal reflections ¹

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Dr L S Saraswathi is an extension worker in south India who has been working in rural development for many years. In this paper, she describes an experimental programme conducted some years ago in Tamil Nadu. She argues that an adult education programme can be planned for a literacy component to serve the purpose of developing critical awareness in the adult participants which can take them to planned collective action for improving the content and quality of their lives. Based on this premise, an attempt was made to evolve a methodology for teaching and learning literacy skills and training others in this approach. From the efforts made in this direction emerged the ‘Issue-based Literacy’ Method (IBLM) described here. The impact of this programme on herself as an extension worker in literacy is also explored.

This project arose from an on-going programme of rural development in Tamil Nadu. Details of the field-study could be described in two phases, exploratory and operational.

1. Exploratory Phase : Evolving the Issue-based Literacy Method

The possibilities of evolving a literacy method were explored in Village Camps organised in two villages, one in Thirukoshtiyur Village in Ramanathapuram district and another in Eari Ethir Vayil in Chengalpattu district of Tamil Nadu, South India. The principles that were kept in focus by the team of trainers were (a) a participatory approach: any programme that is thrust on the people from top down gets rejected for the simple reason that people may not see it as their need. The content of the programme can be and should be decided by the people themselves; and (b) the use of spoken language or dialect in the teaching-learning materials: the use of local language facilitates communication in the educational programmes as well as helps the learners to learn the basics of the language with ease. It reduces the social distance between the teacher and the learner.

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In both of the camps, the participants, about 30 in number, from a cluster of villages, belonged to low socio-economic groups, were from different caste groups (schedule castes and backward castes), and combined non-literates, semi-literates and literates. The majority were between 18-35 years of age.

Each camp was residential and was organized for a period of 10 days.

The general framework of the plan for the camps was made flexible enough for the programme to emerge on its own accord, depending on what the participants thought were important.

A beginning was made by the participants listing their community issues. The subjects raised included acute caste discrimination, poor irrigation facilities, low wages, migration, inequitable land redistribution (taken from the princely rulers), unemployment, procedural delays of the government programmes, gambling, alcoholism, lack of medical facilities, no drinking water facility, non-accessibility of educational facilities. The participants analysed their lives with reference to the issues through role-plays, group discussions, debates and cultural programmes.

The discussions held were recorded in local dialect. The words frequently used were listed and a set of key words identified from the list using the criteria that the words should have meaning for the group, should evoke an emotional response, have sufficient scope for discussion, are frequently used in everyday life, and can be illustrated through pictures. Many of the key words were in the local dialect rather than the standard Tamil language.

Prototype teaching-learning materials were prepared by us (the team organizing the camp) from our experiences in the village camps. These teaching-learning materials were prepared using the identified key words.

The issues listed were classified into five clusters: social, economic, health, education, and women, and discussions were held on each cluster of issues. The key words identified in each cluster were prepared as one lesson. Hence almost all the issues were included as different lessons in the Primer which was produced. Each issue was presented in the form of a picture, and the identified key words were arranged in sequence to convey meaning. The constituent alphabets of the key words were given. Sentences were formed with key words as well as other words made out of the letters and syllables in the key words. The contents of the sentences

were related to the issues presented. The prepared materials were sent back to the villages where camps were held.

The camps helped us to understand the possibilities in planning what we called an Issue-Based Literacy Method. The process of going through the experience of interacting with the adults, their rich life experiences was very intense, practically guiding us to evolve the Issue-Based Literacy Method. The camp experiences clearly brought out that planning at the grassroots level is possible. Given an opportunity, people have the capacity to analyse their problems with all their complexities.

The prototype materials prepared from the camps were used for training field workers in other areas to prepare their own materials for Issue-Based Literacy. The steps in helping these field workers to use the 'Learner Materials' prepared included a discussion of each issue using the picture, and the introduction of the words when the adults were ready. Once familiar with the key words, they were taken on to the alphabets/letters in the key words - the symbols and the sounds associated with the symbols, building new words with the alphabets learned and framing their own sentences related to the issue or reading the sentences presented. Discussion of the issue continued throughout the process of learning literacy skills.

2. Operational Phase: Application of the Issue-Based Literacy Method on a wider scale.

The Issue-Based Literacy Method that emerged from the village camps was put into practice in Thirukkazhukundram Block of Chengalpattu district in Tamil Nadu in 79 Adult Education centres in 31 villages with 2400 adult non-literates attending these centres (1300 men and 1100 women). There were 33 men centres, 21 women centres and 25 mixed centres.

This phase of the programme consisted of three sub-phases, preparatory, implementation (including actions taken by the learning groups) and follow-up.

2.1. Preparatory Phase:

With the participatory approach, the need to select and prepare the personnel become crucial. The training had to be very intense and the process of **learning** given emphasis.

Selection of the animators of the centres was made by the village community, especially the community having the largest number of non-literates. By this, the community could take the responsibility of monitoring the performance of the animator. The 79 animators were from the scheduled castes, as it was found that almost all the programme participants were from the scheduled castes. People from the same caste with some experience in community work were selected as supervisors. (There were three supervisors for 79 Adult Education centres). The only outsider was the project officer.

The 'issue-based literacy method (IBLM)' required preparation of the field-workers (the supervisors and adult education animators) for a dialogue with the people and for creating a democratic climate in the adult learning centres. This meant that the training programme for the animators needed to be an experience of going through the process of co-operative group work, respecting individuals, taking up a leadership role, developing their own skills in analysing life situations and reflecting on them, developing understanding of the social, economic and political structure of the society at the village, state and at the national level, recognising their own role in bringing about the changes they feel important, understanding the need for an alternative system of education, and developing skills in handling 'issue-based literacy' as a step toward bringing in an alternative system of education. This was a large training programme for the field workers.

The experiences provided to the field workers during the training included:

(a) Listening, and sharing their ideas and feelings in small groups, learning the process of group discussion and group decision-making (using fish-bowl technique), expressing one's ideas in a larger group, paying attention to the varying perceptions of the members of the group regarding any issue.

(b) Analysing and reflecting on village life situations: Identifying and studying the various aspects of the village (e.g. physical and demographic features, village facilities, village economy, village politics, village culture); analysing village issues through a case-study of a village, visiting villages around, reporting the visit, identifying the issues, creating an 'issue-web' (an 'issue web' is a diagram relating several different issues and presenting them in the form of a web) for each village, and getting into the depths of the issues linking them with their own experiences through role-plays.

(c) Getting to know the socio-economic/political structures at micro-macro levels:

- Linking the local issues with the state level and national level issues through study of visual presentations of charts regarding Tamil Nadu and a paper on The Present Status of India.

- Experiencing the social system through simulation exercises (for example, the Star-Power game and the Trade game) reflecting on their experiences. **The Star Power Game** is a game in which a low mobility, three-tiered society is built through the distribution of wealth in the form of chips. Once the society is established, the group with maximum wealth makes the rules, which generally are offensive and unjust to the other groups. In other words, a microcosm of the society as it exists to-day is created to help the participants feel the social structure clearly. (The procedure for playing the game is described by Jee Currie S.J., *Learning Through Doing* . AICUF Publication, 1976). **The Trade Game** is another game in which the operation of the society to maintain the condition of the poor the way it is, is brought out. This is done through bringing the reality of assets and expenditures of the rich, middle and the poor people through assets and expenditure cards, and the provision of interaction among these groups in borrowing and lending. This game is to help the participants to see clearly how the poor are always beset with one problem or the other, the main reason being their status in society. (The procedure for playing the game was taken from a book of simulation games in Tamil, D.J. Ravindran and T.K. Sundari, *Vizhippunarchikku Vilayattugal*, AICUF Publication, 1978)

(d) Visualising one's own role in education:

- Understanding the values underlying the education system again through simulation games and discussion of visual picture stories.

- Envisioning features of an alternative system

(e) Understanding the relevance of issue-based literacy method as an alternative:

- Having a dialogue with the potential adult education programme participants in their own villages reporting and identifying key words.
- Preparing the teaching-learning materials for their own adult education centres.
- Getting ready to start their centres

Most of the issues identified were economic issues. The words were in terms of landlord, bonded labourers, toil, overwork during seasons, no work during lean seasons; ‘coolie’ given in kind (i.e. paddy in smaller measure, chaff and stone-mixed paddy given as coolie), low wages, hunger, poverty during lean seasons; their work on the land such as transplanting, water-lifting, harvesting; dependency on rains, water sources of lake, well, and pump sets; their occupation of *poramboke* lands (common lands), B-Memo or *patta* (when a *poramboke* or common land is occupied by an individual, the revenue department issues a memo to that individual which, in a way, recognises his occupancy rights and hence it is kind of land ownership certificate), bribes to the local revenue person (the village accountant), getting cheated by the accountant.

A set of key words based on the issues voiced by the people in their village community in their own words was identified by each animator. Thus each centre had its own set of key-words rather than in a pre-prepared standardised primer. The number of words in the centres in the block ranged from five to 18 words.

Every animator prepared his/her own teaching-learning materials for his/her centre (a chart with key words, along with matching cards with each keyword on each card, constituent letters, letter cards and a letter slide rule).

The initial training of the animators was for eleven days residential camp. The project officer and identified resource persons with field experience in adult literacy and education were the trainers. After the fifth day, one day was given to the field workers to go to their villages and discuss community issues with adult non-literates as part of their training. When they got back, they prepared the literacy materials, charts etc., and also practised how to use them. Once they went back to the centres, every month there were review meetings of all the field workers and they shared their experiences, raised issues and talked about further actions. These monthly meetings lasted one or two days.

2.2 Implementation Phase

We found that the animators were talented in singing, dancing and dramatising. Some of them could compose songs with any theme related to their lives. At the end of the preparatory phase, they were ready with a cultural programme publicising the adult education programme. They went from village to village in groups of 30 and performed the cultural programmes and covered all of the 31 villages. Non-literate adults, men and women turned up in large numbers in these centres.

During this ten months phase, monthly meetings of the animators were held regularly for sharing their experiences in their centres regarding literacy learning and awareness creation among adults.

Communication among animators was facilitated by a monthly news bulletin. Word of mouth communication was quite fast. Anything new happening in one centre reached all the other centres within a week.

Initially, in some of the villages, some of the more educated raised the issue of using dialect which according to them was not in the interest of the people in the programme. The programme participants began to drop-out. But this issue was very deftly handled by one of the animators extending an invitation to the literates for an open dialogue. The questions raised by them were: “why don’t you start with alphabets? Why do you use dialect words? Don’t you think you are making fun of them when you write and read their dialect? Why do you have to write as we speak? We don’t generally write as we speak, do we?”

The animator responded quite positively. “We don’t start with alphabets, as we would like to bring their attention to some of the issues they are facing in life and possibly take action to tackle the issues”. Further, he raised the question, “Which came first? the dialect or the standard written form? Dialect is what we use every day. It is the language that is impressed in our minds and spontaneously expressed by all of us. Moreover, the writing and reading of words, the sound-symbol associations of alphabets are as they are in spoken form. The adults in the programme are familiar with these expressions, and hence it is easier for them to learn this way. They will soon learn to read the standard language”. This helped in bringing the others to support the programme.

With the progress made by the adult learners in reading key-words, identifying letters and making new words, the learners demanded a book for themselves. A work-book based on the “Issue-based Literacy Method” was prepared and given. This was titled “My First Book”. Every adult in every centre could do the exercises in the book. They could read their own progress through the pages of the book. Almost the whole book was left blank for the participants to write individually the words they learned, the letters in the words, the new words created, their own new sentences constructed. Each individual wrote on their own. Spaces were provided on almost every page for them to write their own thoughts.

The project officer started receiving letters of the adults from several centres within three or four months. A file containing letters from these adults was put on display.

At the end of five months, 90% of the participants in the adult education programme could read the key words and build new words with the letters they had learned. About 40% had gained skills in reading and writing short sentences. About 15% had started reading simple books in Tamil. There was a demand for reading materials in several centres, and a total of 17 books per centre was given out.

2.3 Actions taken by the learners on the identified issues:

The case of Edaiyur

Edaiyur is a small village about 10 kms from the town of Thirukkazhukundram. There were about 100 houses, of which 30 houses were in the Harijan Colony. The Harijans (scheduled caste) did not own any land. They were mainly agricultural labourers. They had been occupying and cultivating some of the ‘*poramboke*’ land (common land) for about a decade. They had made efforts to take possession of the land and each family was assigned one acre of land. But they were not given *patta* (the ownership document).

There are several state laws such as The Tamil Nadu Occupants of Kudiyiruppu Act (Confirmation of Ownership) Act 1971; Tamil Nadu Land Reforms (Disposal of Surplus Land) Rules 1955; Tamil Nadu Land Encroachment Act (111 of 1905), which all have protective provisions to the agricultural labourers belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled

tribes occupying such lands. At times, the Government of Tamil Nadu had intensive drives to issue *pattas* to unauthorised occupiers in order to legalise their occupation and confer title on them by virtue of their occupying these lands for a long period of time in the past.

Some of these families discovered that they could get loans for digging wells for irrigating their lands. They therefore applied for loans but were told that they should bring their *patta*. Since then they had been trying to get *patta*. People in this village specified this as a major issue. The key words identified were Payir Thozhil (agriculture), Poyappu (livelihood), Nela Neeru (land and water), Porombokku (common land), Oru Aker (one acre), Kenaru (well), Patta (ownership document), Kanakkupillai (the village accountant), and Aemathal (cheating).

As they were learning to read these words, they started discussing the issue. The animator in this centre had informed the other animators about this issue. They also evinced keen interest in supporting the people in tackling the issue. The people discussed this in the centre for days. Some of the youngsters in the centres and the animators decided to ask the village accountant about this issue. The accountant said, “You people have started asking questions because you are learning to read and write. If you collect sufficient money and give it to me, then I can do something about it”. The ex-Panchayat President met the people and asked for a bribe of Rs.1,000 for getting the *patta*. The animator had discussions on this in the centre. After several sittings, the people said that they had given money several times by selling their cattle, but they never got the *patta*. They further said that if they counted the amount of money they had given from time to time, they could have bought some land of their own and that they were not going to get cheated any more. They decided to go to higher authorities. The issue and the decision taken by the people were brought to the notice of the people in the other adult education centres. They came forward to support the people of Edaiyur. They decided to go in procession to the Collector’s office on a specified date. On that day, people started off with all their kids early in the morning and walked to Chengalpattu Town, the district headquarters. Twenty other animators joined the procession. For the first time in their lives they took a decision, acted collectively and met the Collector. They themselves put forth their arguments to the Collector. The project personnel helped the people to question what was going on, but they did not meet the Collector on behalf of the people. The people since then became more confident of taking up issues and making decisions on their own.

This village had six adult education centres. The people in the village felt strongly about one issue, that is, about the smaller volume measure used for giving coolie in kind (harvested grains) whereas while trading in the market standard measures were used.

When they were learning to read the key words, they started talking about the issue. It was seriously discussed at least in the first two centres. They started writing these words on the roads as well as on the wall spaces available such as the one around the pump sets. They wrote 'Chetti Voodu Potta Marakka' ("the defective measure of *chettiyar*'s house" – *chettiyar* is a caste name; *chettiyars* are in general land owners as well) and started reading them aloud. The landlord did not like it and said, "I am not the only one in this category", and that "the defective measure has been used by many landlords over a long period of time". This opened up a dialogue between the landlords and the labourers and they discussed it a number of times. The discussions were around introducing a standard measure. Finally they succeeded in getting the standard measure introduced.

Such collective decision making and actions led the people to form their own organisations in every village.

This marked the completion of the Adult Education Project. The duration of time of the operational phase was 10 months.

3 *Follow-up Phase:*

The field personnel and outsiders who were involved in the operational phase of the Adult Education Programme in the area formed a group and registered as a Society and continued to work in the same area.

Some of the major activities in this phase were:

(a) **Neo-literate camp** - Thirty two adults participated in this camp which was held in one of the villages for two days. They shared their experiences in learning to read and write and their expectations in terms of the creation of a learning environment for them to continue. The camp brought out that (i) learning to read and write was an emotionally valuable experience for

the adults; (ii) they were interested in learning further about matters known and unknown to them; (iii) they have little access to reading materials; (iv) with the provision of basic help in the form of some relevant materials at least in the initial stages, a better environment for literacy could be made a possibility and a necessity.

(b) Production and distribution of a periodical in the project area: a friend, a writer with experience in writing and printing, was approached for the preparation and printing of relevant reading material for the neo-literates. A news magazine in bold print, 10-12 pages was published every month and distributed to the adult neo-literates in the 31 villages. In the course of time, people recognised the differences between the dialect and standard language. The monthly magazine, initially published in dialect form, changed to standard Tamil at the people's request.

4. Personal reflections

I come from an extension education background (in the early sixties) with its focus on extending knowledge generated through research to the people in need of such knowledge through individual, group and mass approaches using powerful communication techniques. It took some time for me to understand that the information may reach the people but may not make any difference in their lives.

Working directly in the field over three decades interacting with various groups of people – non-literates, semi-literates and literates; rural and urban; men, women and children; teacher-educators and teachers; trainers and trainees and volunteers and so on - brought me in the first instance face to face with myself, helping me to look at my thinking, feelings and actions and their congruence or incongruence. This process of watching and catching oneself was quite fascinating, though at times frustrating. I could see my own ups and downs as a person. I grew up slowly, and am still growing. This was possible because of inspiring personalities in the field I came across (my mentors) and authors of some of the books I read.

This growth within oneself forms the basis of working with any group of persons: the process of helping individuals and groups, linking or making connections with what they themselves bring to the programme with inputs for their perceived needs, providing space for them to become self-aware, to be in touch with themselves, their own strengths and

weaknesses as persons and as groups that get them involved in their actions for improving the quality of their lives.

I strongly believe that the relevance of the content and medium of the educational programmes to the lives of the learners and the centrality of the process of experiential learning in pedagogic practice are crucial in any educational programme. Any compromises made could be questioning our own intentions of our participation in the programme. Why am I doing what I am doing? becomes a constant search.