
Why should we become literate?

The following prose poem,* put together by a group of poor and illiterate people in the state of West Bengal, India, who were involved in the country's adult education program of ten years ago, was adopted as a statement for all those engaged in literacy work by participants in the International Seminar on Literacy in Industrialized Countries, held in Toronto, October 1987, by the International Council for Adult Education.

It was read to a plenary session by Lalita Ramdas of the Society for Alternatives in Education in New Delhi, India, a seminar resource person.

'Why should we become literate?' was published in Bengali in an illustrated brochure by the Bengal Social Service League in Calcutta, and later published in English by the Central government's Directorate of Adult Education. Ms. Ramdas noted that 'It is a testament to the basic wisdom of one group of learners, yet it touches people everywhere.'

What kind of people are we?
We are poor, very poor
but we are not stupid.
That is why, despite our illiteracy, we
still exist.
But we have to know
why we should become literate.

We joined the literacy classes before,
but after some time, we got wise.
We felt cheated. So we left the classes.

Do you know what we found out?
The Babus take up this work
in their own interest.
Maybe the election is around the corner,
or perhaps there is a government grant
or something which must be utilized.

What they taught us was useless.
To sign one's name means nothing.
Or to read a few words means nothing.

We agree to join the classes
if you teach us how not to depend
on others any more.

We should be able to read simple books,
keep our accounts, write a letter and
read and understand newspapers.

One more thing...
Why do our teachers feel so superior?
They behave as if we are ignorant fools,
as if we are little children.

Please do understand that

the teacher may know things
which we don't.
But we know a lot of things
which are beyond him.

We are not empty pitchers.
We have minds of our own.
We can reason out things,
and, believe it or not,
we also have dignity.

Let those who teach us
remember this.
We have enough troubles and sufferings.
Why should we add to them by
joining literacy classes?

If the learning centers can make us
feel a little more cheerful,
then we may feel an urge to
join the classes.
We are not children.
Let the teacher remember this.
Treat us like adults.
Behave with us as friends.

And yet, something more.
We don't get a square meal.
We have few clothes.
We don't have a proper shelter.
And, to top it all, floods come
and wash away everything.
Then comes a long spell of drought
drying up everything.
Would it help if we become literate?

Can literacy help us live
a little better? Starve a little less?
Would it guarantee that the mother
and the daughter won't have to
share the same sari between them?
Would it fetch us a newly-thatched roof
over our heads?

Literacy should help us live better;
at least we look at it that way.
They say that things are being planned
for us — the poor.
Would literacy help us in knowing
those government plans?

Would it help us know
how to raise our yield, and increase
our income?
And from there could we borrow money
on easy terms, and what benefits
would we get from the cooperatives?

Would we get better seeds, fertilizer
and all the water we need?
Would we get proper wages?
And this we think is learning for living.

They say that the new program
promises things like this.
But, is it only writing on a scrap of paper?
Is it like one of those very many
past promises that were never kept?

Will this program teach us how to think
and work together?
Will "doing" be made a part of "learning"?
If all this is done, all of us
will join the literacy classes.
It will then be
learning to live a better life.

We are weak and are ill very often.
Will the program teach us
how to take care of our health,
and become strong?
If it does, then we shall all come.

They say that there are laws to protect
and benefit us. We don't know these laws.
We are kept in the dark.
Would literacy help us know these laws?
Would we know the laws that have changed
the status of women? And the laws that
protect the tribals among us?
We want a straight answer.

Then we shall decide whether
we should become literate or not.
But if we find out that we
are being duped again
with empty promises,
we will stay away from you.

We will say,
'For God's sake, leave us alone.'

** This poem is reprinted from Literacy in the Industrialized Countries: A Focus on Practice
(Toronto: International Council for Adult Education, 1987), pp.18-19.*