

The Role Of Literacy Training In NGO's Efforts To Improve The Self-Sufficiency Of Rural Indian Women

Rosemarie J. PARK

University of Minnesota

325 Vo Tech

1954 Buford Avenue

St. Paul, MN 55108

| The non-governmental organizations (NGOs) | A question of class | The village settings |
Conversations | Women of the model village | The women weavers | Literacy in fact and literacy
in published goals | Successful literacy gives women a role to play | Some conclusions based in the
data | References | Appendix: Participating NGOs in the University Intern Program |

In third world countries the role of women in economic development is being recognized as crucial. This role is increasingly recognized by the World Bank and other international development agencies. In India improving the literacy rate among rural women is included as a major goal in nearly all government and nongovernmental (NGO) projects. Whereas the literacy rate for males in India is 64%, the female literacy rate is 39%. There are also huge variations in literacy between

states (Kerala is 73%, Rajasthan 12%) and between rural and urban women (7.96% versus 42.82%).

Our goal was to find out more about literacy programs for women in rural villages. External agencies seeking to improve the economic status, self-esteem and the literacy of women abound in India. However, these efforts that often come from outside the villages themselves may be differently perceived by the village women who are the intended beneficiaries. In addition, the implementation of the programs varied considerably. Whereas literacy was a stated goal, what methods were being used to implement it? How was literacy taught? Was literacy regarded as an intrinsic skill needed to meet other goals or was literacy taught as a goal in itself. Were programs being implemented.

I spent three months in Pune, Maharashtra, as part of a University study program I acted as mentor to five undergraduate young women who learned the local language and interned in non-governmental projects in the Pune area. Over this period I was able to visit six NGOs that acted as hosts to our student interns. I was also able to take part in several trips to villages that had been actively involved in self-sufficiency programs for women. Literacy was included as a goal in each project. Interviews were conducted with all program directors and staff. In addition, I was able to interview 10 women in two villages in rural Maharashtra. Interviews were conducted with the help of the local Indian in-country coordinator. The questions included "Do you think village women have benefited from the program?"; "Do you see the program making a difference for your children?"; "Do you think literacy has given the women more say in their everyday lives?" Our taped conversations were translated from Marathi to English. As a group we functioned as participant observers and were able to monitor implementation strategies first hand.

The non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

The most striking element in talking to officials working in the NGOs was a universal

disenchantment with government programs. The message seemed to be that we can not rely on the Indian Government to get anything done and the only way to get improvement is through private sector efforts. The state of Maharashtra has taken this to heart. There are pages of NGO listed in the Pune area alone ranging from highly organized and long standing Family Planning Associate on India which has links to the International Planned Parenthood Federation to the Association of Women Entrepreneurs that seemed to be run by a married couple from their apartment in the suburbs.

A list of the NGOs we worked with in Pune and a summary of their stated goals shows a very wide range of interests from preschool education in the villages to agricultural reform to entrepreneurial projects for women (See Table 1). All of the NGOs have improvement of the state of women mentioned prominently in their goals. Improving the literacy rate among Indian women has been a major preoccupation since the 19th century and a major goal since independence in 1947 (Desai 1990: 23). The reports and prospectuses given to us by the NGOs follow this tradition.

A question of class

The NGOs that we visited, with the exception of the Vanarai rural development project, were run by upper caste Brahmin women. Vanarai is run by men. The village women were lower caste or tribal women . All were run with what can be described as a top-down management style. The attitudes towards the lower caste women varied from respect to what might be described as outright "paternalism". This attitude also extended to our interns. A young women intern fresh from the United States and still struggling with the language describes the director of one NGO this way:

The bird calls. A young women scurries to her holiness's abode, quickly to beckon in the next

privileged person who was granted a personal audience. Three minutes later out comes the first blessed one looking slightly confused with the brevity of her personal audience until informed that because of her holiness's busy schedule all personal audiences are three minutes. (Simmons: 1994).

The attitudes towards lower caste or unscheduled caste women also influenced the type of work they were trained for. At least two of the NGOs train village women to become maids in the cities where they earn less than two-hundred Rupees a month (Seven US Dollars) or to eke out a living making handicrafts. (See Table 1). This is hardly self-sufficiency. These organizations seemed to be characterized by a lack of vision, fed perhaps by an underlying belief that the women were not capable of running a business or aspiring to skilled occupations. One of our interns reported back that in the smallest NGO the Association of Women Entrepreneurs, the women were not allowed to learn the accounts and relied on the director to manage the books for them. The director is quoted as saying "We have to constantly tell them what to do, because they are not capable of figuring it out on their own" . This attitude was predominant in two of the six NGOs we visited.

The tradition of autocracy can be contrasted with a Freirian grass roots approach to indigenous lack of literacy. Indeed the existing structure and philosophy mitigates against the Freirian ideal of education as social transformation (Taylor: 1993). Attempts by the Indian government at social transformation have led to considerable resistance. For example, the reservation of certain political posts in village government, the gram panchayats, and the institutions of higher education for lower and unscheduled castes has led to wide spread protest by the Brahmins and higher caste groups. This system has caused higher caste Indians to go into private for-profit and non-profit agencies as an alternative to politics, law and government where they predominated in the past.

The village settings

We spent extended time in two villages, a model agricultural project was centered in the first about

three and a half hours outside Pune, accessible only by a four-wheel drive. This village was relatively prosperous since the implementation of a low technology irrigation system which allowed storing water after the monsoon and preventing run off. An artesian well had been constructed giving the village access to water year round. The farmers had been able to grow two crops each year consisting of peas, onions and tomatoes. The village was also close enough to urban centers for there to be a market for the crops. During our two visits the major farm landowner was sufficiently wealthy to marry his teenage daughter to the son of a farmer from another village.

While we were there, the usual pattern of village life persisted. The women did the "stoop work" picking the peas and loading them into oversize sacks. The houses were simple two room houses some with tin roofs. Electricity had been run in, but the water was from the village well. The village was informally zoned with the unscheduled castes and tribal migrant workers living outside its confines.

The second village three hours into the Deccan Plateau gave no such picture of prosperity. There was no irrigation system beyond a well and the ground was parched and rocky. A drought had been in progress two years. The rows of village huts were part thatch, part tile and some tin roofed. People had been leaving the village to find work where they could. In the far corner of the village a large two roomed structure housed hand operated weaving looms where the women worked on cotton rugs and cotton blankets. The women's project had begun several years previously, but had fallen on hard times since the price of cotton had increased worldwide and the market for their product and price of raw material brought their continued existence into question. We were told a major problem the village faced was the abandonment of women by their husbands who if dissatisfied with the first wife, simply started another family by setting up housekeeping with a new wife. We were told the problem of bigamy among Hindu men was a major concern in rural villages we visited and in Pune itself. Our guide was a doctor from town who donated two days a month to treating the villagers health. There was no clinic or hospital within three hours drive. Villagers who needed to get to town hiked to the main road and hitched rides on trucks.

Conversations

The conversations with the women in the villages were difficult. Not only was language a barrier, using an interpreter is slow, but finding common ground across culture and class is also hard. I often found myself talking about my son or commiserating about the unreliability of men as a bridge to other subjects.

As a western woman who came to visit it seemed to them I did not represent anything they themselves might have aspired to. Indian society does not give women, especially lower caste women that type of freedom. Furthermore Hindu and Moslem fundamentalists have identified western women as a symbol of evil. In popular culture, Hindi movies constantly portray the heroine as the traditional woman who sticks by her man despite the attempts of the westernized bad woman. Village women more vulnerable to these cultural influences and have not had the opportunity to see life beyond the villages.

Women of the model village

Our first set of conversations took place after our second visit to the model village immediately after a wedding ceremony. Women were dressed in their best saris and we sat on the ground at the back enclose of the bride's house along with a tethered calf and a few hens.

The women were shy and reluctant to talk. Other women encouraged them. The village men were a source of irritation since they hung around on the periphery adding their own comments. I may well have been the first westerner that these young men had seen. I was treated like a major curiosity. Why was I traveling without my husband? Where was my son? It took a while and a

second visit to get a more relaxed atmosphere once some of the curiosity element had worn off.

Our initial analysis shows that model village women are vitally concerned with literacy as a way of helping their children have a future. They are more fatalistic about their own chances of improving their own lives. There were marked differences in the attitudes of the women. Two expressed surprise at the thought that they might ever attempt any schooling for themselves. What would be the purpose? Indeed the model village although developed by a NGO that includes education of women as its major goal, had no way for women to contribute to village projects except through physical labor. The village had no library or access to books. The Indian Government itself limits adult education to those under 36 years old. Perhaps these women were correct that for them if they remained in the village, literacy did not have much meaning. For their children, education presented an opportunity to succeed and get out of the village. The women who seemed to be the informal leader took a more positive approach saying that education for women was a good thing. She spoke about how important education had been for her children. The three years of village school she received as a girl had helped her handle her children's schooling. But again the impact of education in her own life was minimal. The major success story was the higher caste woman who had left the village. Her education with relatives in town had helped her make a suitable match and escape village life. Her comments about how important education had been to her were also heavily referenced to her spouse who had supported her education.

The women weavers

The women weavers were interviewed in the one room clinic that also served as an office for the weaving project. As part of the project they had learned the basics of book keeping, writing sales receipts, etc. as well as the mechanics of reading. The visiting doctor who ran the clinic had been instrumental in getting the initial grant for the project that at its peak had occupied twelve women.

The project was a way of helping these women survive perilous times. They did not see the skills they had learned as "literacy" per se. They had simply done what they had to do to run the project. The major problems they saw related to the high number of bigamous husbands (50%), causing many women to be left to support themselves. The women were happy that the village had its own elementary school. There was overwhelming concern for the children's education. One woman said I do not want things for myself but for my children.

The women talked about their work with a degree of self confidence. The physician who had initially sponsored the project was not involved in the day to day bookkeeping. However, the project was still dependent on the help he gave in purchasing the raw materials and transporting the goods to market. There were no ongoing literacy classes for the women. They had gained the skills they needed to participate in the project and saw no need to take things further.

Literacy in fact and literacy in published goals

Of the six NGOs we visited all had literacy improvement of women as a prominent goal. However only two had active literacy programs where women were being instructed in the educational skills they needed to accomplish a stated self-sufficiency goal. In the case of the Indian Family Planning Association, no active literacy classes were being given, but plenty of low literacy materials were available for women who wanted to know about the value of limiting family size, getting treatment for leprosy, or improving the hygiene in the household etc. Women were the target of these educational campaigns since the mishandled attempts to persuade men to get vasectomies had misfired. The number of sterilizations performed in Pune was 784 female and 28 male. As noted below the only project that had ongoing educational versus training for women was Vanasthali, that trained village women as preschool teachers.

Successful literacy gives women a role to play

The most successful project in terms of the difference it made in women's lives, was one of the oldest and best endowed. Vanasthali Rural Development Project has a total budget of Rs 56 million (Rs 30=\$1). Operating in seventeen villages they offer six month preschool training courses to young village women. A group of thirty-five village preschool teachers had come into the head office for a refresher course. At the directors invitation they told me how the chance to be a preschool teachers and set up preschools in their own villages had altered their lives. Some of these young women cried as they explained that they now were important people in their villages. They earned wages. They had learned to read and even had their own bimonthly magazine with their stories in it. They were transformed. They were given small loans to buy bicycles and sewing machines. This enabled them to be mobile and increase their self sufficiency. Change had not been easy. Two young women reported that they had been followed and harassed by young men in the village. Vanasthali intervened by talking to the village elders about the situation.

This one project really had made a difference to women's lives and serves as a model for literacy programs. It is difficult for village women to see education as a tool for bettering their lives unless they are given concrete help to make an economic difference. Cultural influences also work against female independence. For most of the women we met the realities of village life made it difficult to see how education could ever impact their lives except through their sons. If a son became educated improved his fortune then he could take care of his mother. Orphaned women in India are women without a husband or son to take care of them. Such women are often destitute.

Some conclusions based in the data

Competition for funds among NGOs make it tempting for such organizations to overstate their goals, attempting to provide all potential funders with a favorite cause. Attempts to include literacy

and self-sufficiency for women has been especially likely to attract funding.

NGOs cannot be all things to all people. There needs to be some systematic way of evaluating what are strictly goals on paper and what can reasonably be achieved given the scope and funding of each organization. The NGO forum and the Beijing women's conference shows that the NGOs are beginning to act together towards common goals. There must also be a better system of evaluating effectiveness than presently available.

(Wagner 1993). This lesson is not without implications for the United States where the increasing privatization of once government programs increases the need for sound evaluative techniques and close scrutiny of non-profits to make sure projects have a legitimate chance of succeeding and benefiting the clients to be served.

Efforts at improving the economic self-sufficiency of women were all top-down in organizational structure. All seemed to rely on a dynamic leader who was active in fundraising and set the direction of the organization. More efforts should be made at including women in the planning process. Again the lesson of listening to the recipients should also be followed in the United States. Few programs in the United States actually incorporate Freirian approaches, although a certain lip service may be given to his ideals.

Successful efforts need to give women a role to play that makes sense in their everyday lives. This involves Wikeland/Reder's concept of internal literacies. Literacy needs to have a purpose beyond being an end in itself (Wikeland/Reder 1992). Learning to read and write may strike a women in India as a nice but not necessary skill. Learning to run a weaving business to become self-sufficient has a more immediate appeal. Such projects are crucial in India where a women without a male to support her is often destitute. Many women find themselves abandoned as the result of bigamous practices by males in the villages. Learning the reading, writing and mathematics skills needed to run the business become part and parcel of the total project.

However, these projects must have a reasonable chance of succeeding. It makes no sense to teach women a craft where the market is already saturated with such products. The sale price on the product is often such that economic self-sufficiency is out of the question. Nor does training women to be domestic servants for a pittance really do much for their economic prospects. In the United States we are attempting ways to get women into higher paying skilled craft trades. Such a program may be unrealistic in India and other Third World countries currently. But successful projects in Tamil Nadu have taught women quarry workers how to run the quarry and negotiate better contracts from buyers (Chunkath 1993). In the final analysis, exchanging one form of servitude for another such not be acceptable to funders.

Third World women face almost impossible odds. But women and children in the United States are also at high risk of poverty. Young single women are increasingly giving birth and are faced with fewer welfare benefits and the need to work to support themselves. The necessity of higher educational levels in the current job market in the United States gives motivation to the women to control their own destinies and might be a better selling point than education for its own sake.

Finally, literacy should be seen as a functional part of all development projects, not as a separate component. Literacy training such as bookkeeping, reading instructional materials on a "how-to" level, are intrinsic to project success. Projects funded by agencies such as the World Bank or USAID should require integrated literacy training as a condition of funding.

References

Chunkath Sheela (January 10, 1993 edition) *The Hindu*, New Delhi, India

Dessai. Neera, (1990) *Women's Education in India, The politics of women's education* , 23-44

Henshall Barbara (June 1995) University of Minnesota MSID Intern, unpublished term report.

Simmons Jill (June 1995) University of Minnesota MSID Intern, unpublished term report.

Taylor, Paul V.(1993) The Texts of Paulo Freire, Open University Press, Buckingham, UK.

Wagner, Daniel A, (1993), Literacy & Development: Rationales, Assessment and Innovation,
NCAL IP93-1

Wikeland, Karen, Reder Steve. Hart-Landsberg S. (1992) Expanding theories of adult literacy
participation, NCAL

Appendix: Participating NGOs in the University Intern Program

1. Avaben Navrachana Kendra & Santha (Founded 1984; Works mainly in suburban slum areas)

Goals

- Child nutrition
- Preschool
- Health care for children
- Library reading room
- Sewing & handicraft classes for women
- Women's study classes (finance & education)
- Medical referrals
- Leprosy Center (joint project)

Effectiveness*

- Heavily bureaucratic.
- Top down & Brahmin dominated.
- Respect for clients lacking
- "Belief that destitute women are their problems are the result of lower than average intelligence".
- Many social workers male
- Successful program having women assemble speaker parts for Phillips PLC.

2. Association for women entrepreneurs (Founded 1994)

Goals

- Counseling center for women
- Vocational Training
- Sale of handicrafts
- Employment for women
- Catering & spices unit
- Rural Development program

Effectiveness*

- Run primarily as a top-down organization.
- Destitute women are neither in control or have understanding of the process.
- No literacy classes. Staff did bookkeeping etc. for the women

3. Family Planning Association of India Pune Branch (Founded 1949)

Goals

- Increase couple protection rate to 60%
- Increase immunization level of expectant mother to 100%
- Increase immunization level of children to 100%
- Increase women's literacy level to 50%
- Increase age of marriage for girls to 18 years
- Reduce infant mortality rate to 60 per 1000 live births

Effectiveness*

- Extremely effective in reaching rural areas.
- Highly organized professional staff.
- Literacy materials provided on topics of hygiene and family planning
- Style of physicians in the field seemed autocratic
- No literacy classes were present in the villages we visited.

4. Stree Aadhar Kendra (Continuous action for equality; Founded 1970)

Goals

- Development activity for uneducated women organizing livelihood programs
- Awareness activities against the oppression of and atrocities against women

Effectiveness*

- Highly dependent on the energy and drive of the director.
- Excellent linkages internationally
- Strong advocacy skills for women. Confrontational style

- Autocratic in the extreme
- No direct literacy services

5. Varnerai Peoples Movement for Rural Development and Green India (Founded 1983)

Goals

- Voluntary work for the community
- Removal of illiteracy
- Family planning
- Clean beautiful environment
- Adequate gober gas plants & latrines
- No-ax no grazing farming
- Prevention of drugs & addictions

Effectiveness*

- Model village program showed no evidence of any literacy activity. Only way for women to contribute was through physical labor.
- Reported under women of the model village above.

6. Vanasthali Rural Development Center (Founded 1981)

Goals

- To conduct 6 month training courses for preschool teachers
- To start courses of programs for rural women to make them economically independent & increase self-confidence
- To expose rural people to education and health care through books and films

- To publish a bimonthly magazine to document progress
- To conduct camps and socio-cultural programs for personality development of rural youth.

Effectiveness*

- Highly respected and effective organization
- Run by upper class women, but very efficiently.
- On-going educational camps and programs for village women.

* Based on 3 to 6 month observation and participation by interns

**INTERNATIONAL LITERACY INSTITUTE, University of Pennsylvania, 3910 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA
19104-3111 USA; Telephone 215-898-2100; Fax 215-898-9804;
E-mail: ili@literacy.upenn.edu
URL: <http://www.literacyonline.org>**