

Quality Schooling for All: Lessons from the Total Literacy Campaign

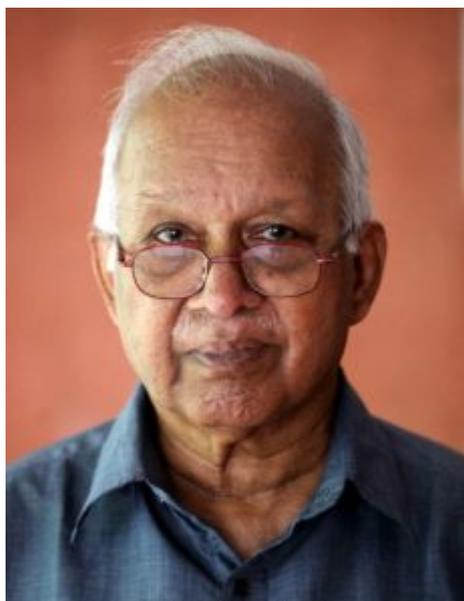
[Practice Insights](#) > [Personal Reflections on Practice](#)

Quality Schooling for All: Lessons from the Total Literacy Campaign

An Interview with M. P. Parameswaran

By V. Santhakumar

The Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) was a major and probably the only national social movement in India that brought the governmental and non-governmental actors together to address the issue of mass education (illiteracy) in India. This campaign was first carried out in the Ernakulam District of Kerala and was a joint effort by the district administration and the popular science movement – Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP). It was this experience that led to the launch of the national-level campaign and KSSP helped in the creation of the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS) as the non-governmental partner in this effort. M.P. Parameswaran, a nuclear scientist turned science and literacy activist, has played a key role in these processes. He is a well-known thinker in Kerala and his book titled, Nalaam Lokam (The Fourth World) – a treatise or an imagination of a desirable world – has attracted popular attention and created several controversies within the state.



M.P. Paramswaran, popularly known as MP, talks to V Santhakumar on the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC), and key lessons from the efforts to provide quality schooling for all.

On the origins of the TLC and the participation of KSSP

The program for imparting literacy was organized under the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) in the 1970s. The KSSP was interested in participating in it even then and though we submitted a proposal, we did not get financial support. The KSSP had organized and coordinated a couple of all-India campaigns to popularize science in the mid-1980s, which had enhanced its national visibility and a network of similar organizations could evolve through that process. I met Anil Bordia around that time to get printing paper under special quota for the publication of a series of books by KSSP and I did not have to introduce KSSP or myself as he had read about us in a newspaper article. That meeting was the beginning of a long friendship. We met regularly after that whenever I was in Delhi.

At a time when technological missions were being initiated by the government led by Rajiv Gandhi and his advisor Sam Pitroda, Anil Bordia became the Education Secretary. The

Education Department prepared a program for a technological mission for the eradication of illiteracy. The program document was shared with me and Anil Bordia encouraged me to look at it critically. I found many useful strategies but did not like the framing of it as a 'technology' mission and felt that it should instead be a 'social' mission. That led to the Total Literacy Mission (TLM) and I became part of the General Council and Executive Committee of the TLM. However, there was no mechanism to implement the literacy program other than the NAEP, which even with all its implementing units did not seem adequate for the execution of a mass literacy project.

The brain behind the technology missions, Sam Pitroda, came to Trivandrum, and we had a detailed discussion. He was interested in taking the help of KSSP. I expressed my doubts about the political will to go ahead with a mass literacy program and suggested a one-year holiday for all educational institutes to encourage all students and teachers to participate in the literacy program. Pitroda admitted that such a radical proposal would not get political acceptance.

KK Krishnakumar¹ had asked K R Rajan, the District Collector of Ernakulam District to submit a proposal for a literacy program in the district to the TLM. I had prepared this project proposal and the plan was to enlist the support of KSSP to implement the program through a campaign mode. There were two initial hitches. First, TLM could not provide money directly to the district administration, it had to be given to the government of Kerala, and then the program would have to be implemented through the existing department of adult education and its centres. It was recognized that these centres were not appropriate for a mission-mode approach towards eradicating literacy within a short time. Hence, the plan was to get the funding to KSSP and then transferring the money to a new entity, the District Literacy Mission, a registered society controlled by both KSSP and the district administration.

The second challenge was convincing the leadership of KSSP. Many were apprehensive of the participation in a government program of this nature. KK and I argued that if we do not collaborate with a program that had included our suggestions in the design and had also offered us autonomy in the implementation, then we had no legitimacy in criticizing the government. After several rounds of discussion, the KSSP leadership agreed to be the main partner of the program.

Next, there was the apprehension if we would get enough volunteers to work as literacy instructors without any monetary compensation. The need was for around 15000 volunteers and we finally had 23000!

The Ernakulam experience encouraged the TLM to accept the campaign mode at the national level (which was different in that the volunteers received an honorarium under the NAEP). The BGVS was formed at the national level to assist the TLM in supporting the district administrations to plan and implement the literacy projects. It was a partner in about 250 districts. In about 150 districts, the projects were driven primarily by the district administration. However, BGVS was part of the decision-making process regarding the approval of the literacy projects of the National Literacy Mission. Hence, the district administrations were interested in consulting BGVS in the design/plan of literacy projects.

The major enabling factors of the TLC

A lot has been written about it. In my view, there was a conjunction of opportunities then. The government of India was embarrassed about the level of literacy in the country and there was a set of senior government officials who were completely taken in by the plan and the campaign approach of the TLM. Then, there was the participation of KSSP and BGVS. The latter, though a non-governmental organization, was seen as an integral part of the governmental or the formal decision-making process with its role communicated to all

tiers of the administration including the district administrators. With regard to the KSSP, it so happened that many from the middle-class that were unhappy with the state of affairs where so many around them were illiterate, signed up as 'literacy volunteers' on who this literacy campaign had been thrust (unlike that in a hierarchical system of an organization). This was the beacon to the KSSP in Ernakulam to participate because the sincerity of the mobilizer was important.

The campaign enlisted 15 million volunteers and 150 million people enrolled to attend the literacy classes. As long as these enabling factors were in place, the campaign moved ahead but started collapsing when these factors started to change or recede.

It is possible that the campaign may not have reached a significant number of illiterates or some of those who had come to the literacy classes may have dropped out. However, the campaign has resulted in a drastic increase in the demand for school education within the country. The state governments all over the country are being forced to respond to this increasing demand and to expand the facilities for schooling. The Right to Education Act can be seen as a follow-up action of these processes which were created as part of the TLC.

On the support of the Communist parties

At the outset, these and almost all political parties provided support in a number of places or, or, one can say that no one opposed it publicly. We may have also used the house or other facilities of a party leader or legislator of CPM in a few places. But that kind of support was provided by other leaders too. The Socialist leader, Krishna Kant, who was the Governor of Andhra Pradesh then, invited us to use the premises of the Raj Bhavan for our work.

However, the communist parties were not willing to spare its

cadres for the literacy work. According to them, the vanguard of revolution are the workers of trade unions in advanced industrial establishments (agriculture or peasantry are only supporting sectors). Literacy was not seen as something that contributes to the revolution. As mobilizers of youth, student and women organizations, they were not willing to spare these too for the campaign. In general, the CPM was not quite forthcoming in its support of the program. So, while it did not oppose it, it did not also support it, which is why they have not gained an iota from the momentum created through the literacy movement.

This is different from the approach of the communist parties in China and the Soviet Union at the beginning of the communist rules there. Mao Zedong was for the transformation of the peasantry and agriculture and he recognised the importance of literacy (though the approach of Chou En Lai was different). The Communist Party of the Soviet Union had also recognised the important role of scientific literacy in the scientific and technological development within the country.

The one organization that seems to have realized the importance of education (of the kind that they consider important) is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). They have undertaken massive efforts to influence schooling (including the provision of schools for specific social groups like the Scheduled Tribes).

We also made an attempt, through the BGVS, to create a set of alternative schools but were not successful.

On the efforts to use the momentum created through the TLC towards 'Quality Schooling for All'

The KSSP helped in preparing the new curriculum as part of the District Primary Education Programme in Kerala. We prepared books such as 'Joyful Learning' and 'Teaching Double-Sweet'. In general, only one percent of the school teachers are

excited about such experiments, and about 20-25% of them can be motivated to participate in these efforts. Hence, the success of the efforts to improve schooling depends on the motivation, training and participation of teachers. This could not happen in Kerala as governments have not been successful in training or motivating teachers.

Any intervention to improve the quality of schooling is going to be a slow job; we have to be patient. There must be 20 million teachers and 200-300 million students in India. Due to the very high level of inertia within the system, it takes a long time to see the benefits of efforts aimed at improving the quality of schooling. Many people and agencies especially, the individuals or agencies that fund may not have enough patience in this regard, and hence large-scale efforts cannot be sustained by voluntary organizations.

However, one of the major actions that has followed and has used the momentum of the TLC in Kerala is the Peoples' Plan Campaign as part of the efforts to make the decentralization of governance fruitful. The KSSP has been active on decentralization since 1975 when it formed the Grama Sasthra Samiti (village science council). The KSSP has seen 'constructive work' as part of its agenda of 'Science for Social Revolution' (its slogan), which is different from the approach of popular science movements in other parts of the country.

On the need to use schooling for the creation of 'desirable' human beings

Currently, education focusses on building the ability to compete among students. The purpose of education should be to create human beings who live comfortably in a desirable world, which is sustainable and less iniquitous. In our view, the existing curriculum can be used for this purpose and the issue is not one of the curriculum; it is about how it is used to teach and transform children.

The KSSP has carried out a few experiments in this regard. A series of workshops were organized, each with 20 teachers, where they were encouraged to think how to use the existing textbooks to teach values other than those of competition and coming first in the class. The attempt was to encourage students to understand and respect others in terms of class, caste, religion and gender. We organized camps (Sneha Sahavasam or staying together with love) for school children who come from different religious and caste backgrounds. They were encouraged to understand the names of relationships and festivals followed by groups other than their own – a form of inter-cultural education. Children could develop close friendships beyond caste and religious barriers through the programs.

On the strategies needed for a desirable development in India

This development should be one that enhances the physical and spiritual quality of life. There are valuable attributes of development like disease-free (disease-adjusted) longevity. Development should be sustainable and one that uses less amount of natural resources. Though there can be a correlation between the per-capita energy consumption and the quality of life at lower levels of energy consumption, the graph flattens very soon. (Higher levels of) consumption should not be the criterion of good-quality life. The quality of leisure is equally important. Most people in the modern world suffer from the lack of quality leisure and spend long hours commuting and in traffic jams. There should be a reduction in the consumption of luxury or vanity goods. Spending more time at work to enhance such luxury consumption may reduce the quality of life.

At the national level, there should be a decline in the expenditure on arms and on the defence industry. Such a reorientation of consumption would mean a greater focus on services such as education, healthcare, and food for all. The

government should spend more on the primary sector – agriculture and allied activities. The income of the people involved in these activities needs to double or treble within a short period. Inequality (based on the Gini Coefficient) has been increasing, and this trend can be reversed or moderated only when people involved in the primary sector see an improvement in their incomes.

Ultimately, the focus should be on the happiness of people. There is a need to address the alienation at work; work should become something that yields happiness. The focus should be on emancipation and not on consumption. There is an excessive focus on consumption in the world today. Television and other forms of media constantly encourage consumption. People struggle hard to enhance their consumption. This will not lead to happiness or emancipation. I think people should take a pledge that they will not buy any products that are advertised on TV and other media. Development needs to be assessed on the basis of the happiness index, dehumanizing index, waste index and so on; the quality of development needs to go up in terms of avoiding or minimizing dehumanization and waste.

However, the signals that political parties including those on the left communicate to the people are different. They seem to be valorising the process of making money by all means and focusing on a consumption-driven development.

On the doubts of some intellectuals on the usefulness of education for the tribal population and other such groups

There were apprehensions on the usefulness of 'education for all' in the discussions on the New Education Policy in 1985. I think the issue is the notion of development. If we see development as one that enhances the physical and spiritual quality of life, it requires higher levels of education. Or from this perspective, education enables (or should enable) individuals and societies to move towards that kind of

development. This necessitates the provision of such an education to all.

There are many practices of the tribal or the indigenous people that are in tune with a desirable notion of development. For example, they may be using a variety of food – both vegetarian and non-vegetarian – collected from the forests. This food including fruits and meat is the most appropriate or natural food for human beings. The tribal populations may continue to depend on and nurture the community ways of sharing. They may not impose restrictions on girls regarding the choice of marital partners. These are desirable attributes. However, there has to be a decline in the fertility rates and infant and maternal mortality/morbidity rates in these communities. Education can play an important role in this. There can be other such benefits of education. Hence, it would be incorrect to argue that education is not needed for any section of society. However, there is a need for an appropriate (different) perspective on education, which has to be derived from the perspective on desirable development.

On some actions that can lead towards a desirable nature of development

_It is through the TLC that I, personally, could make a difference at the national level. On the other hand, a similar impact is there on decentralization or the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala. In both these campaigns, the faith of the concerned government officials enabled the processes. This was challenging because there were multiple stakeholders and people from different walks of life came together to make a difference in the life situation of the people around them.

There are a set of initiatives that have followed decentralization, and the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala deserves attention. The cultivation of paddy by younger women is an important case. This can help in many ways. It has

brought out a set of younger farmers in a state where people have been moving out of agriculture. It has the potential to reinvigorate paddy cultivation; protect our wetlands, and; use local resources to address poverty and unemployment. One can see a similar initiative in the coastal areas of Kerala, called 'Theera maithry'. A number of enterprises have brought together women from the less privileged backgrounds and have helped them to earn reasonable incomes on a sustainable basis.

At the national level, I am impressed by the experiments in Relagan Siddhi, where the collective effort of farmers could mitigate the drought conditions in the village and in Mendha Lekha, the village known for the pioneering efforts towards community forest rights for the tribal population.

On the challenges encountered by activism for social change

Many people are impatient and they want results tomorrow. One should not be motivated so much by the ultimate result. The process of working towards an objective should be meaningful. People who are not interested in their work or do not derive joy from it may get frustrated easily.

Interview by V Santhakumar, Professor, Azim Premji University.