

Background

Kerala has the distinction of being a historic state in India so far as literacy development is concerned. It has the highest percentage of literacy amongst the states of India. It was the first state to experiment with a campaign for implementation of the Total Literacy Programme. Kerala is divided into fourteen districts. One of these districts, Ernakulam, became the first district in the country to be declared a fully literate district in February, 1990. The state itself was declared a fully literate state in 1991. As a result of the high literacy levels the Scheme of Continuing Education was launched in all fourteen districts at the same time in 1995.

The scheme

The Scheme of Continuing Education provides for 100% assistance to the states for the first three years of implementation. The State Governments are required to share 50% of the expenditure during the fourth and fifth years of the project. Thereafter, the State Government is expected to take over the total responsibility for the programme. The intention is to ensure that the programmes of continuing



education are owned and undertaken by the people without any financial assistance from outside the state. The community needs to sustain the programme in the long run. The basic objective of such a programme is to provide lifelong learning facilities at learning centres.

Basic unit

The central facility for the implementation of a CE programme is a continuing education centre (CEC). This centre is set up to cater to a population of 2,000-2,500, 500-1,000 of whom would be neo-literates with basic literacy skills acquired under the Total Literacy and Post Literacy Programmes. Financial assistance is provided for the establishment and maintenance of the CECs by the State Literacy Mission Authority. The Kerala State

Literacy Mission Authority (KSLMA) is an autonomous body constituted for this purpose. The KSLMA is registered under the Societies Registration Act for implementation of the scheme all over the state.

Preparatory action

The scheme of CE was launched in 1995. However, the actual implementation of the programme did not begin until 1997-98. This delay was due to the considerable time required to establish and prepare a continuing education centre. This process includes



identification of locations for centres, selection and training of volunteer facilitators (known as **preraks**), obtaining reading materials and other infrastructure, and mobilization of the community. Community awareness needs to be raised. There is sometimes a loss of interest in literacy development and adult education generally because of the gap in time between the end of a Post Literacy campaign and the beginning of a CE campaign.

Kerala's advantages

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1. Grassroots democracy

The high literacy rate and strong grassroots democracy in this southern state are significant factors for the success of continuing education. The grassroots democracy is in the form of a **panchayati raj** system. Under this system, local government, comprising elected members of the community, plan and implement the development schemes. These elected bodies, located at the district, block and village levels, are called district, block and village **panchayats** respectively. The elected members of these committees represent people from all sections of society including women and marginalized groups. They are sensitive to the needs of people, who are in a position to influence action through their representatives.

Another strength of this system is that the **panchayats** are responsible for all development schemes, including all forms of education. They are in a position to best use the resources of the community and co-ordinate the various developmental activities in the community's best interest. Since the elected representatives are in contact with the community and include women representatives of minority sections of society, mobilization of the community becomes easier and management of the field level functionaries does not pose any problem.

2. People's planning

The local government provides funds for the planning and implementing of the various activities that the **panchayats** are



involved in. These activities are the result of collective decisions based on the needs of the community. In a literate society, there is naturally a preference for activities connected with vocational education that help to improve the living standards of the people. The people of the community have a high level of

awareness of training needs and what programmes are available and therefore exert pressure on the **panchayats** for funding various activities at the learning centres. Thus the continuing education centres in Kerala normally have few problems in obtaining adequate funds and facilities for their effective functioning.

3. The Corpus Fund

The collection of the *Corpus fund* is unique to the State of Kerala. A membership fee of Rs. 1 per month is levied on each learner for the use of facilities at the CEC. The people have responded positively by contributing more than Rs. 40 million. This step ensures an intimate sense of ownership and guarantees the participation of community members in the learning centre activities. It also enabled the KSLMA to use this money to improve the facilities at the learning centres.

Literacy rate

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The comparatively high literacy rate of the state is visible on the roads of any town in Kerala. We can see persons from the lower strata of society reading newspapers by the roadside stalls. This habit of reading newspapers has helped to enlighten them. It has also raised the demand for and strengthened the role of libraries at the CECs. The people have also learnt to demand their rights. It is difficult for any public authority to resist their reasonable demands for things like schools, learning centres, health centres and vocational training. They are quite enlightened about the advantages of empowering the community through various income-generating activities. The trainers cannot ignore their demands and the training programmes are therefore regular and successful.

Innovative experiments

Here are some specific examples of CE activities carried out at the learning centres.

1. Agricultural literacy programme

This programme was part of the Alappuzha (Aleppy District) District scheme of continuing education. Agriculture is extremely important for a country like India where 70% of the people depend on cultivation for their livelihood either directly or indirectly. Kerala State, however, depends on other states for its food since it is not completely self-sufficient. Hence it is considered essential for the state to develop its agriculture. Therefore, literacy amongst farmers through continuing education projects conducted by the Kerala State Literacy Mission received a high priority. Programmes on agricultural literacy were conducted in the Prayikkara Continuing Education Centres in Mavelikkara Municipality. Activities at the two continuing education centres of Prayikkara and Cuntiyoor are as follows:

- (i) Mavelikkara is a municipality in the district of Alappuzha which understood well the possibilities of continuing education for development of the community. It was natural that the Agriculture Literacy Programme was initiated in an area formerly called **Onattukara** which has a rich cultural and agricultural heritage. The Municipal Chairman Shri Kesavan and the resourceful Municipal Saksharatha Samithi of Mavelikkara have had a crucial role to play in establishing the two Nodal Continuing Education Centres and the five Continuing Education Centres within the municipal area. The programme takes place at the two continuing education centres, Prayikkara and Cuntiyoor, with the help of the two supervising nodal centres.
- (ii) The programme started at the initiative of Smt. Ajantha Prasad, **prerak** of the continuing education centres. Some people in the municipal area were illegally holding 2.5 hectares of land. This land was quite fertile. The municipality retrieved this land and gave it to the continuing education centre at the request of the **prerak**.



- (iii) Initially there was a lot of protest from the people who had been using the land. However, the Saksharatha Samithi under the leadership of the Municipal Chairman convinced them about the importance of the land to the centre and the usefulness of the programmes taking place there.
- (iv) It is especially remarkable that out of 40 beneficiaries on the centre committee, 20 are women who are also undergoing the Equivalency Course Level I. Of the total number of participants, 80% are women and most of them belong to the scheduled castes (lower class poor). The participants are divided into groups which have been given a timetable and a fixed area of land for the various agricultural tasks they are assigned to do.
- (v) The produce resulting from their activity is brought to the continuing education centre and is available for sale at prices set by the committee.
- (vi) Encouraged by the success of this venture, the Municipality has set aside in its People's Plan enough funds to support a fully fledged project concerned with agricultural literacy. A special project envisaged under this is the cultivation of vanillin.
- (vii) Smt. Kochumol, **prerak** of the continuing education centre of Cuntiyoor, is supervising a similar project for the cultivation of jasmine and medicinal plants. Twelve neoliterates are working on some 40 hectares of land located on the bank of the river Achankoil.
- (viii) These two programmes could also be used as a model for confronting the problem of illegal occupation of land along the riverbanks.

Legal literacy in Thrissur district

Thichoor village in the district of Thrissur is a good example of the creation of the right environment for a seemingly impossible idea.

It all started with an uneventful meeting under the auspices of the Kerala State Legal Service Authority on 9 November 1999. Soudamini, the **prerak** of a **panchayat** continuing education centre, was one of the invited. The idea of a litigation-free village, casually aired by George Pulikuthiyil, stayed in Soudamini's mind after the meeting. She approached Jananeethi, a voluntary organization working in the legal field. In a series of meetings and deliberations, participants thoroughly discussed the idea of a litigation-free village to arrive finally at a strategy for a plan of action. By this time the initiators of the scheme had met with the architects as well as the managers. There were people from all walks of life involved: bureaucrats, representatives of political and voluntary organizations, judges, lawyers, law professors, representatives of **panchayats**, and members of all the political parties. Soudamini herself was made the General Convenor of the apolitical Executive Committee chaired by Ms. Seema Babu, the President of Varavoor Panchayat.

Fifty students of the Thrissur Law College came forward to conduct a survey, with the assistance of local volunteers. They visited the 520 households in Thichoor village and

collected details of disputes of different grades of intensity, including those to be decided in the law court as well as petty quarrels between individuals.

Volunteers from Jananeethi law students provided counseling and created the right environment for local people to settle disputes in an atmosphere of cordiality. Case files were examined and decisions made by a number of distinguished advocates and judges such as the District Judges Sri. N.K. Vijayan and Sri. Krishnan Kutty Varrier, and retired magistrate Shri. O.K. Namboothiripal. Their rulings have the authority of the decisions of a court of law.

On 7th May 2000 in an atmosphere of celebration Thichoor was declared a litigation-free village. The declaration by the Hon. Minister K. Radhakrishnan occurred during a colourful ceremony.

This legal campaign is one of the most striking examples of how the right person and the right atmosphere can bring about the total participation of the manpower and other resources of a locality to achieve wonderful things. Those who freely donated food and vehicles and used their time and energy to bring together the disputants and the decision makers without any thought of reward can be proud of their accomplishment, becoming instruments in the hands of fate in the creation of history.

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