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Problems with India's Understanding of Literacy

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to examine the issue of literacy in the Indian education system and its impact on critical thinking and human development. Through an analysis of existing literature and data, it is found that the Indian education system places excessive emphasis on certain forms of literacies, such as reading and writing, while neglecting the importance of comprehension. This narrow definition of literacy hinders the development of critical thinking skills and limits people's ability to fully realize their potential. One way of resolving this problem is by expanding the definition of literacy to include critical thinking skills. The development of critical thinking skills would lead to a broader understanding of the world and would enable individuals to better understand and engage with their surroundings, leading to more informed and empowered citizens.

Keywords: Literacy, Critical Thinking, functional literacy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Krishna Kumar in his essay “What is Worth Teaching” makes an observation about how education in India has become synonymous with certain areas of knowledge and certain other corresponding areas of ignorance (Kumar 11). In light of this argument, it can be inferred that within the Indian education system there is the excessive focus given to the development of certain forms of literacies like reading and writing while the comprehension of what is being read or written is not given much importance. The dominant presence of this non-comprehension mindset is a major problem that has led to a lack of deep awareness about self and the world thereby hindering individuals’ choices regarding the fulfillment of their human potential (Ahmed 183).

An underlying reason for this problem is the flawed pedagogic practices that promote non-comprehension (Sinha, 1). This bias towards certain forms of literacies is also evident in the ways literacy is defined in India. Any person aged seven and above, who can both read and write in any language, is considered literate. Further, a person, who can only read but cannot write, is not literate. It is important to note here that the definition of literacy plays a paramount

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role in assessing the literacy competencies of people and in designing policies and literacy programs for the country (Ahmed 182). A parochial definition of literacy can have deep consequences for the learners and the education system at large.

India's understanding of literacy is very narrow, limited, and non-expansive as it focuses excessively on developing certain forms of functional literacies like reading, writing, and arithmetic. It is widely recognized that these basics are not rooted in the goals of critical thinking – conceptualizing, inferring, inventing, testing, and hypothesis (NCRWC Consultation Paper 237). The excessive focus on functional literacies devoid of critical thinking is a major roadblock in India's journey to achieving an excellent education system. An early warning sign of this was seen in 2011. The 2011 ASER stated that only 48.2% of students in the fifth grade can read at the second-grade level. The number of students completing their primary education with inadequate numeracy and literacy skills is startling (Knowledge at Wharton,1).

These statistics are a true reflection of the rudimentary education system that has been continuing since British times, driven by the culture of rote learning, and high-stakes testing. These results are also indicative of the fact that confining the definition of literacy within the walls of functional literacy is not the best way to move ahead in the 21st century. This narrow version of literacy hampers the capacity for critical and independent reasoning. The product of such limited understanding is students who can manage to read and write but struggle hard when it comes to making connections between the text and the real world. Making sense of what is being taught is very important since it adds meaning to what is being taught and makes one more informed and empowered. It occurs when students move beyond the words and understand their thoughts and ideas. An example of this is seen at the level of the country, wherein if the citizens have adopted critical thinking they are less prone to give in to manipulation and propaganda. Such educated citizenry is also able to see the bigger picture without clouding their judgments with biases. Apart from this it also makes people gain control of their thoughts and be more open to acceptance of varying opinions. This quality can be very crucial during the time of Conflict resolution.

In addition to this, India's narrow view of literacy also limits people's capabilities. The relationship between good quality education and human development is well established (NCRWC Consultation Paper 237). Literacy is one of the three crucial indicators while measuring the Human Development Index (HDI). By taking into consideration merely the functional literacies, we are depriving people of the right to develop and realize their true potential. Having a much broader view of literacy that includes critical literacies helps individuals develop a deeper understanding of self, and aids them with the ability to self-reflect,

thereby helping them make more conscious and well-informed decisions. The ability to make informed decisions and realize their true potential leads to personal growth and overall satisfaction and happiness in all aspects of life.

This excessive focus on functional literacy has also led to the development of this attitude of noncritical acceptance of the textbook as a source of knowledge, devoid of critical analysis. Adopting a limited view of literacy has also given rise to what is referred to as “educated unemployment” (Llchman 794). According to a report prepared by the Center for Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University, unemployment among the well-educated (meaning those with at least a graduate degree) is thrice the national average (Gupta). The practice of training students to memorize theoretical concepts is deep-rooted in India’s education system. Practical classes for improving the skills of students are not conducted, and as a result of which students have knowledge of theoretical concepts, but lack the practical skills and training needed in the workplace. An example of the same can be seen in the field of engineering in India. According to a survey by NASSCOM in 2019, India produces 15 lakh engineering graduates every year, but only 2.5 lakh of them succeed in getting jobs in the core engineering industry (NASSCOM Survey, 2019). An important reason for this mismatch between what is being taught and what is required by the job market is the insufficient practical knowledge and industry exposure that these engineering graduates have. The education module in engineering colleges emphasizes more on technical writing skills and memorization abilities of the students instead of deploying innovative methods that may improve their technical competence and skills (India Today, 2021).

The need of the hour is thus to adopt a more nuanced and broad definition of literacy. An example of making the definition more holistic can be the inclusion of critical literacies. Focus on critical literacy can help establish a deeper connection between the students and the text. It will further help to make the text seem less alien by understanding the social and cultural context of the text. One reason why our work in this direction has been slow is because of our deep-seated belief in the “literacy hypothesis”, which makes the claim that cognitive and social changes observed over time can be traced back to changes in means of communication, especially the invention of the writing system (Olson 1). We need to complement this hypothesis with works talking about the development of students by incorporating critical literacies, to arrive at a more holistic framework. The essence of the above essay can be summed up in Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher’s statement “Literacy is about reading the world, and not just the word”.

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