

Book Reviews

Practice and Research in Literacy, edited by ADITI MUKHERJEE and DUGGIRALA VASANTA, Sage Publication, New Delhi, pp. 263, Rs. 280.

Practice and Research in Literacy is an anthology of papers on theory and practice in literacy as reflected upon and as practised in various parts of the country. The first section with five papers includes theoretical perspectives on literacy, society, language and education: A farce called literacy by Rama Kant Agnihotri, Literacy and development: challenges to the dominant paradigm, Nellore revisited: locating the anti-arrack agitation in its historical context, Language, dialect and literacy by Aditi Mukherjee, and, Universal literacy and oral cultures: some dilemmas by LM Khubchandani.

For once almost all the authors have realized that literacy is not simply a problem of teaching alphabet and the rudimentary training in reading and writing a few hundred words and sentences. There are obviously a number of problems that have been duly noted by the authors of this anthology. First of all there is the paramount problematic of the register of speech, dialect or language, whatever that means. There is no uniform policy or direction. The register of the instructors is invariably different from that of the learners—the villagers, the tribesman etc. In fact in most of the cases the project is doomed from the very beginning. All

that the learners require is some knowledge of the alphabet in which they can transcribe the words of their speech that only they know. No instructor can teach them the very rich vocabulary in the specific profession of the learner—farmer, carpenter, potter, hunter . . . In the beginning there is always a fairly good correspondence between the pronunciation and the written word. Later on, as in all writing systems of the world, English, French included, it is a matter of historical and cultural development or convention. The purpose of literacy is not clear. A number of authors have invoked Mahatma Gandhi but Gandhi's project was very different from what the case studies of this anthology show us. Gandhi was not simply interested in giving some elementary education to his people. His aim was, without any ambiguity, that of nation building, and for that a certain uniformity and a certain national ideology was the pre-requisite. One can cite here the case of French. There are no such literacy programmes in France. However, since the revolution in the eighteenth century, the French national policy is to educate all French children in a certain standard national register. Teaching of French is as such one of the foremost task of the State to enable French citizens to participate in the national agenda. Obviously this is not the case in India. First of all there is no national register or no national register is accepted by all. Secondly, even in different states,

there is no uniformity or the question of uniformity is endlessly debated. In fact, in most of the cases in the literacy projects, there is a clear bias against any uniformity, for as has been noted by a number of authors of this anthology, any attempt at uniformity destroys the local culture.

In all these literacy projects it is never clear whether the objective is to teach elementary exercises in writing and reading or with the help of literacy an attempt is made to awaken the masses to their fundamental rights to education and health, and social and political participation at the state and the national level. A few quotations from the papers will illustrate what I have been aiming at:

Rejection of dialect would be tantamount to a rejection of certain ways of life because dialects are not mere embodiments of pure linguistic form but they also reflect and embody a set of values and a sense of shared experience. Because no two groups ever entirely coincide in their experience or belong to precisely the same set of social formations, every act of understanding involves an act of translation and a negotiation of values. It is essentially a phenomenon of interrelation and interaction. Unfortunately the onus for such translation in the particular context falls on the dominated groups. This happens as the common grounds for negotiation are denied to them because the only way a dialogue is made possible, if at all, is in terms of

the dominant group's paradigm, i.e., the standard language. It certainly does not permit the learners to fall back upon their own idiom as the means of developing a positive sense of self worth. And this a direct affront to the positive face needs of the learners, non-recognition of which may well be the grounds for a breakdown in communication. (Aditi Mukherjee, p. 99).

Since knowledge is defined from the vantage point of the elite, the social milieu of the poor is generally associated with a cognitive deficit. There is considerable evidence now to show that the so-called illiterate societies nourish several important local oral and written literacies and forms of knowledge that compare favourably with any modern mode of discourse. . . . Given the economic and political pull associated with each language in a given setting, it is not always easy to implement and sustain the academically sound but socio-politically neutral concepts of literacy and education through the mother tongue notwithstanding the ad infinitum repetition of the 1953 UNESCO declaration in support of education through the mother tongue. . . . We also know once again of whole elite groups which for political mileage construct extremely attractive rhetoric of patriotism and nationalism around the mother tongue of the community to which they belong but send their own children to schools that use language of power right from the kindergarten. (RK Agnihotri, pp. 44-46).

After commenting on the state of the 'tribal literacy' programmes in Kerala, Krishna Kumar stated that the literacy programmes are not really concerned about teaching reading; they have a deeper ulterior motive, which is to acculturate the

illiterate. It must be noted that reading the alphabet, writing one's name and counting to hundred may be sufficient to become 'literate' if you come from marginalized section of the society. But an Indian 'citizen' is considered to be genuinely literate by the State only if he (and she?) can read the 'classics', the constitution and the daily newspapers. It is only that citizen who can contest the elections. (D Vasanta, S Gupta, and P Devi, p.158).

The Chhattisgarhi language differs considerably from standard Hindi and native speakers of Chhattisgarhi have considerable difficulty in managing to speak what is called standard Hindi, let alone read or write it. There has also been an articulation of the Chhattisgarhi identity from the point of view of classroom practice, the initial reaction to our proposal that we would conduct literacy classes in Chhattisgarhi was one of disbelief. Many of our teachers and learners equated education with learning the Hindi language, and did not think it was possible to be literate in Chhattisgarhi. A familiar reaction was that Chhattisgarhi could not be written as it had no script. (Irina Sen, p. 235).

The ideological mess in theory and practice is obvious. In fact there is a lot of import-export in the articulations of these authors. The article, Literacy pedagogy: the West Bengal scenario by Sandip Bandopadhyaya has ten references. Incidentally all ten of them are by the foreign scholars—Bettelheim, Chomsky, Freire, Goodman, Gumperz, Halliday, Olson, Piaget, Street, Vygotsky. Obviously there is no Bengali who knows anything about Bengal!

Once more this anthology

demonstrates, if any demonstration was ever needed, how intellectually bankrupt is the Indian academic milieu. I agree with Agnihotri that most of these literacy projects are a farce. All these statistics about Kerala being hundred per cent literate or the whole country having acquired sixty or seventy per cent literacy amounts to absolutely nothing. If literacy is defined by the capacity to articulate in a grammatically and logically coherent manner, we cannot boast of more than five per cent literacy in Bharat.

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Translating Caste: A Katha Classroom Text, edited by TAPAN BASU, Katha, Delhi, 2002, pp.262, Rs. 295

There cannot be, perhaps, an Indian literary act without 'caste' as its compelling site of production as well as reception. Implicated in the processes of culture, such an act is bound to negotiate and respond to the ever-changing dynamics of caste identities. At times 'caste' becomes too conspicuous and loud-pitched, and at times it remains dormant under the grand ideologies of Marxism, Nationalism, Religion and Secularism. But it never withers away. It is fiercely contested as well as cherished. It is contested because it stratifies society into rigid grids, it is cherished because it structures the amorphous mass of people into a system.

To cull out an anthology of caste-stories from a scenario that is so intensely caste-driven, is a challenging enterprise for it has to avoid the extremities of caste-rhetoric on the