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**Literacy And Empowerment: Perceptions and Realities**

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper is located in a context in which adult education, and in particular rural women's literacy has become a marginal concern, both for the State and for civil society. The absence of creative energy and low investment of resources has meant that effective and sustainable literacy opportunities are not being made available. Underlying this scenario is an assumption that rural women are not interested in literacy. The reality however is different. Rural women are clear about the linkages between literacy and empowerment.

The paper will provide evidence of this by drawing upon Nirantar's work. Nirantar's experience of working with rural women in Lalitpur District in Uttar Pradesh towards empowerment through literacy and educational interventions clearly demonstrate women's interest in literacy. The experience also demonstrates the possibility of designing literacy and educational interventions for women, which are rooted in women's realities and responsive to their learning needs.

In particular the paper will share the strategy of intensive camps, which provides a non-threatening teaching learning environment for literacy as well as issues such dowry, violence against women, reproductive health, legal and land rights.

## **2. The Context:**

The fact that the 2001 census showed a significant jump in literacy rates (from 52 % in 1991 to 65 % in 2001) and more importantly, that female literacy rates rose by 15 % is repeated time and again in various national and international forums. The government loses no opportunity to flaunt these figures. But what lies behind these figures is another story.

It has long been recognized that quantitative data is not is not beyond the pale of politics. The State's keenness to record progress nationally and internationally, often leads to the publication of questionable data. Not surprisingly the quality of literacy data too has been questioned.<sup>1</sup> Even when one considers the official data, while there has been an increase in the female literacy rate, when compared to the male literacy rate, there is a vast difference. According to the 2001 census, male literacy stood at 78.71% while female literacy was only 51.28%. A 27 % difference is considerable. The picture gets more gloomy when we look at the situation of marginalized groups. For example, the literacy rate amongst females of the schedule caste and schedule tribes was merely 26%.

In Uttar Pradesh, where Nirantar has been working, the picture is particularly grim. According to the 2001 Census, Uttar Pradesh ranks 31st nationally in female literacy achievement with 42.98% female literacy, far lower than the national average of 54.16%. Moreover, the gender gap is significant - while the female literacy is merely 42.98, the male literacy rate is 70%. According to the 1991 census, while the Uttar Pradesh female literacy rate was 25.31%, it was only 10.69% for schedule caste females and 19.86 % for women of schedule tribes. The infant mortality rate in Uttar Pradesh is 83.5 (the national

average is 70.8). The sex ratio in UP, according to the 2001 Census is 898 as compared with 993 for India as a whole. Clearly there is not much to cheer about.

### *The response of the State*

On the one hand the Government is happy with the strides made in female literacy, on the other glaring gender disparities still exist. This is the scenario despite the commitments that the State is bound to, having ratified numerous international covenants and declarations.<sup>ii</sup> The issue of adult women's literacy and education continues to be a marginal one (or one can say a non-issue). The government has no inclination to spend any creative energy or resources on adult Education and women's Education<sup>iii</sup>. The budgetary provision for the women's education (as a separate head) is in fact completely missing from the 10<sup>th</sup> plan. The National Policy on Education, in 1986 stated that 'Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women....The National Education system will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women.' but today these words seem hollow. The only tangible effort towards women's education and empowerment has given a single programme –Mahila Samakhya, a national level programme for rural women sponsored by the Department of Education. Even within Mahila Samakhya there has been a declining level of importance accorded to adult women's literacy. The literacy campaigns of the 90s, which saw women's participating in large numbers is now a moribund programme. The National Literacy Mission, which was once a fairly dynamic body, now provides no direction or energy to this sector. Several reasons are attributed for this - lack of vision, delays in funding, poor leadership of the National Literacy Mission and most importantly a lack of political commitment. The programme today is plagued by the problem of relapse into illiteracy. Sustaining literacy and educational processes requires long-term investments, which are not forthcoming.<sup>iv</sup> The other reason for flagging enthusiasm is the irrelevant and instrumental programme content. Often literacy programmes are unable to address the needs of women or make the necessary linkages between literacy and their lifeworlds.

This was evidenced by a study of literacy materials in Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal, undertaken by Nirantar for **DFID**<sup>v</sup>. The study found that ``The content predominantly covers...hygiene, environment, small family norm, nutrition, problems of early marriage, status of women (which is usually related to health and in particular reproductive health) and income generation. We find these themes and messages being repeated in the primers, booklets and broadsheets. Even story booklets reiterate the same themes and messages. Therefore the range of material from which neo-literates can choose from is fairly limited. Constant repetition both makes these messages ineffective and does not inspire people to read.... While trying to raise issues on women's status, books tend to be didactic and message oriented - taking dowry is bad, early marriage leads to ill health etc. There is little analysis regarding why these practices exist. Even when analysis is offered, sweeping statements are made but there is grossly insufficient exploration of the realities being analysed... There is a striking and extremely unfortunate absence of material written by neo-literates.''

A reason for the de-prioritization of adult and women's literacy lies in the fact that the government's priority is now almost solely elementary education. It argues that literacy rates and the overall education situation will improve if one focuses on the future generation. While the importance of elementary education cannot be denied, the exclusive focus is worrying. The ground level reality is that though enrollment rates have increased drop out (or rather 'push out') rates are also very high. The government has not been able to change that. So we continue to have children dropping out of the system whose needs have to be addressed, often outside the school system. The quality of education provided in government schools is questionable even today. Children who pass out of school cannot read. They too come back to attend various programmes to strengthen their skills. Issues of access for girls, poor and the marginalized continue to be serious concerns.

Additionally, it must be recognized that the educational needs and interests of different sections of society vary. Adults need education and literacy to improve their quality of life, to enhance their levels of information, to improve their skills, to recognize and exercise their rights as citizens, strengthen democratic processes and to demand their rights. Therefore, there is a place and importance for both - elementary and adult education are not competing concerns. Moreover, the State claims to promote empowerment of women yet the role of education in sustaining these empowerment processes is not recognized. Women are being called up to play new roles - as members of local organizations, self-help groups or Panchayats. Not being literate in such situations is disadvantageous. Yet no effort is made to provide and sustain literacy and continuing education opportunities.

### ***The response of NGOs and women's programmes***

The marginalization of women's literacy is unfortunately not a phenomenon that is limited to the State. Increasingly there has been a whittling away of literacy from of the agenda of NGOs and women's programmes, despite a clear articulation on the part of rural women about the value of literacy. The marginalization of women's literacy as an area of concern on the part of civil society has also meant that that there have been very few studies undertaken in the last ten years which seek to understand the nature of literacy interventions for adult women.<sup>vi</sup> I draw upon one such study undertaken to evoke the perceptions of women about the value of literacy as well as to analyse the nature of response of governmental and non-governmental literacy interventions. This study was conducted by Nirantar as part of the 'Gender, Citizenship and Good Governance' programme of KIT, the Royal Tropical Institute, Netherlands.<sup>vii</sup> The selection of the interventions studied was such as to include programmes that are considered to be 'effective' both by the State and by civil society actors. Therefore while the study does not claim to be representative, it does highlight the limitations of operate even within literacy interventions which seek to provide adult rural women access to a right that they have long been denied.

I focus here on a key finding of the study that relates to relates to the polarization with respect to the agendas of literacy and women's empowerment/governance. Most

organizations prioritize either literacy or empowerment. If literacy is the focus, the empowerment agenda is compromised and if empowerment is the focus then literacy is neglected. An important reason underlying this divergence is the failure to recognize the inherent linkages between literacy and women's empowerment. There was a perceived disjuncture between 'education' and 'literacy'. Education was viewed as a spectrum of learning processes related to perspective building and provision of information which would strengthen collective action, and therefore critical to empowerment. Literacy on the other hand was seen as useful (for varying reasons) but not as inherently linked to these educational processes. The implications of this disjuncture between education and literacy were evidenced in the study.

One of the manifestations was that in almost all cases the curriculum was centrally determined. Therefore even if social issues were included along with the teaching of literacy skills, the curriculum was not organically rooted in learner's lives. There was also no space for the learners to be creators of knowledge by being able to use the literacy skills that they were gaining. They were instead viewed only as recipients of knowledge.

This view of the non-literate as a vessel to be filled can be likened to a 'default' setting. We all live in a society which constantly equates the non-literate as the one lacking in knowledge. The construction of literacy in the rhetoric of the State since Independence has seeped into all of us. Therefore the likelihood of literacy teaching-learning being a power laden interaction, despite the best intentions is strong. The study deduced that it is only an investment in perspective and skill building that can enable facilitators of literacy programmes to approach literacy in a manner that is truly respectful of learners.

This normative understanding of literacy also militates against recognizing its linkages with empowerment. Literacy is so deeply embedded in status quoist constructions that even facilitators of literacy interviewed in the study, who in other respects have a strong perspective of gender justice, articulated the importance of women's literacy in terms of contributions that they will be enabled to make towards the family's welfare.

The problem of insufficient capacity building needs to be located in the continuum of the disjuncture between education and literacy. It is because literacy is undervalued, that not enough attention is paid to capacity building of facilitators. As a result of this, in the teaching learning processes, the connections between literacy and empowerment are not made. When women do not find such a literacy intervention meaningful, women's supposed 'lack of interest' in literacy is used to argue that literacy is not that important in the empowerment agenda, thereby furthering the gap between education and literacy.

The study also showed that there is also a linear linkage that is being perceived between literacy and empowerment. Providers of literacy celebrate the 'impact' of literacy in that it has, post facto, enabled women to participate in panchayat elections, challenge the corrupt ration shop dealer etc. However that these linkages need to begin during the teaching learning process itself is not necessarily recognized. One of the consequences of this linear approach is that while in the initial phase the focus is almost entirely on literacy, in the next phase, while the 'outcomes' in terms of empowerment become the

focus, literacy is neglected. Given the fragile nature of literacy skills, the relapse into illiteracy is rapid. The consequences for women, who had invested precious time and energy into the acquisition of literacy skills, are not factored into the programme. One of the consequences is the denial of further learning opportunities which educated women from the community are given greater access to. The potential of literacy to enhance autonomy, through reduced dependence upon the sponsoring organization and a greater ability to directly voice concerns, remains unfilled. Once again, the study found that the manner in which the linkage between literacy and empowerment is perceived tangibly impacts the way in which teaching learning of literacy takes places and there is a resulting failure to reduce the gap between education and literacy.

Literacy not being perceived as fundamentally linked to empowerment results in it becoming the most vulnerable element of the education/empowerment agenda. In the face of the numerous challenges of sustaining literacy efforts because the State and donors not making available the resources necessary for sustained literacy interventions, literacy became a casualty in all the programmes which were studied.

*In this paper, drawing upon our experience of working towards women's empowerment through literacy and education, we hope to show that the process of involving women in literacy programmes is empowering and provides several opportunities to challenge gender relations. We also hope to show that contrary to what is believed women are interested in literacy - that is if the programme can address their needs and make linkages with other processes of empowerment.*

### 3. Nirantar's community based intervention in Lalitpur

**Nirantar is a resource group that works in the area of gender and education. Nirantar believes that education is not limited only to reading and writing. Education is a process that holds the possibility of empowerment and transformation. In addition to its roles of building perspectives and capacities of NGOs, research and advocacy, Nirantar is also engaged in direct community level work. Since November 2002, Nirantar has been working with Dalit women and adolescent girls in 20 village of the Mehroni Block in Lalitpur district, Uttar Pradesh. The main focus of our work in this area is empowerment of women and adolescent girls through literacy and education and to build awareness among them on issues related to gender, development and other social issues. Nirantar's field programme in Lalitpur is called Sahjani Shiksha Kendra. As part of this programme, literacy camps and village level education centres are being run for women and girls. Along with literacy these interventions also focus on health,**

## **issues related to the public distribution system of subsidized food grains and other essential commodities, legal rights and violence against women.**

### *About the area:*

Lalitpur district has a population of 7, 52,043. The proportion of schedule castes is high and the social structure is extremely feudal. The sex ratio is 884 women for every 1000 men, lower than the state average of 898. The literacy situation is also abysmal at approximately 50% for the entire population. Even more disturbing is the wide gender gap– with the male literacy rate at 64% and the female literacy at a mere 33 %. In terms of school enrolment in Lalitpur for the year, 2000-1, schedule castes accounts for 35% of total enrolment. Disaggregating by gender, one finds that girls comprise only 44% of the total schedule caste enrolment.

Some of the salient feature of the Lalitpur district were confirmed by the finding of the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) activities undertaken by Nirantar (2002). This PRA exercise was conducted in 5 sample village. It was found that

- Most of the poor are wage laborers – a majority being agricultural or stone quarry workers. Wages are far below the minimum daily wage. Men earn an average daily wage of Rs 25-30 and women earn Rs 20.
- There is high rate of seasonal migration for work. In some instances both men and women migrate, but the high incidence of female-headed households indicates greater male migration.
- Facilities and infrastructure are poor since many villages are located on the Uttar Pradesh-Madhya Pradesh border, and are consequently neglected by both states.
- Inter-caste tension and caste-based discrimination is omnipresent. Caste is an important factor in determining access to resources and education.
- Child marriage is very common. A majority of the girls are married by the time they are 15.
- Health facilities at the village level are non-existent. People have to go to the nearest towns to meet their health needs.
- Most villages have primary schools but these remain shut for the most part as teachers are absent. The nearest junior high school was 7-8 km away.
- Gender bias in terms of school attendance was evident. In most villages one was able to find literate boys but very few girls. A few *bahus* (daughters-in-law) were educated as they come from outside the area.
- The few girls who do attend school belong to upper castes. Many girls shared experiences of being discriminated at school because of their caste. Some girls don't attend school because their families are unable to bear the cost of education.
- There were extremely low levels of information in the villages about panchayati raj or any other information related to government schemes.

## **4. Residential Literacy Camps: An Initiative...**

In this paper we are sharing our experiences of organizing residential literacy and leadership camps for women and girls from the communities we work with. The camps have been an important source of learning for me about issues of empowerment. Most importantly there has been a realization that literacy is not a 'neutral' issue - it is embedded in numerous power relations, including caste equations. We have found that it is not possible to separate and ignore the happenings of their daily lives from the literacy transaction. Before sharing and analyzing the camp experiences I would like to begin with why we chose the camps as a strategy, what the objectives of the camps were and the pedagogy we followed.

The burden of work on women learners is tremendous. In addition to agricultural or stone quarrying work, is housework. It was difficult therefore for women to participate regularly in the village level literacy centers. When they came to the centers, worries of home preoccupied them. Various family members would call them away on some pretext or the other, often saying that the teacher is staying in the village and they could come any time to study. We spoke to the women regarding this problem and they told us that there was not much agricultural work during the months of May and June and they could devote more time during those month. We therefore decided to organize residential literacy camps away from the village during these two months.

11 camps were organized in the year 2003-2004 at the block level for 10 days at a stretch. (See annex 3 for details). The majority of these women were Dalits. Some backward caste women also participated. The main aim of these camps was:

- To create an ambience that motives women to come forward and learn something. Our experience at the literacy center in the village had taught us that women felt inhibited to participate in activities which required physical movement and would come under public scrutiny in the village.
- To increase the skills of women so that they can express themselves independently and be able to develop a relationship with the outside world.
- To establish and increase the link between literacy and gender, caste, health and other social issues.

***Motivation for coming to the camps:***

*Sheela lives in village Dhurwara. She is a 30 year old Dalit woman. Along with the responsibility of the housework Sheela also has to work in the fields and look after a small shop. She was very happy on hearing about the camps because she would learn to read and write quickly and easily away from the worries of work. She said that she would come to the camp the day we asked her to... But when we went to her house, a worried Sheela told us that she very much wanted to go for the camp but could not. Who would look after the house? Who would cook? Who would look after the children? Earlier when we had spoken to her husband he had said that he would look after the house when she went to the camp but today he also had the same questions as Sheela. That day it took many of convincing before Sheela came to the camp.*

*14 year old Haribai, was arguing with her parents to be allowed to come to the camp. Her parents were of the opinion that literacy would not be of any use. They wanted her to stay at home to look after the younger siblings. Haribai constantly repeated that her brother also goes to school and his fees also has to be paid. There is no fee for the camp. Why isn't she being sent? She caught our hand, picked up her bag and set off for the camp with her friends.*

These problems were not specific to Sheela or Haribai. It was not an easy task for any of the women to leave home for the literacy camps. We had to hold innumerable meetings with husbands, brothers, father in-laws and even the sons of all the women who participated in the camps. There was no end to the family's questions. What use is it to make them literate? All they have to do is cook. We don't want them to do jobs....

Of course, it was also true that this was the first time that women were leaving their homes to participate in an activity such as this. So far they had only gone out to the markets, or to attend festivals and weddings. Such outings are socially acceptable and at these times the husband, brother and sons comfortably do all the housework. But now these women were going out to learn something, to improve their capabilities and the men had reservations. Who would cook? Look after the kids? Each one of the men felt that going to study was not 'reasonable' thing to do.

The women themselves could not believe that they were going to the camp to acquire literacy, to learn something. They were inhibited and hesitant to start studying at that age. Many meetings were held at the village level too. The whole village was involved. Every person in the village was told several times about the camp and its arrangements. Some people belonging to the 'higher' castes in the village also spread rumors against us, saying that the camps were only an excuse to take the women and sell them off. Although getting the women and girls to come for the camps was difficult and challenging task it was not as if that they didn't want to come.

*Sheela wanted to learn reading and writing skills to be able to write out the bills herself and keep the accounts in her shop.*

*Haribai wanted to improve her literacy skills and continue to her studies because her brother was being educated whereas she had to dropout after class V.*

*Jaleb wanted to learn because she wanted to be independent and to show her husband that she could live without him after he had thrown her out of his house.*

Despite their willingness there was tremendous negotiating that needed to be done with their families. It was as if these women have no rights over their own lives. Household responsibilities have been thrust upon them in such a way that they are not even meant to think of any thing beyond these responsibilities. If they decide to do something else it is ridiculed. They are made to think about how the house would function without them. But ultimately we were able to convince the families about women participating in the camps.

But the struggle did not end there. During the camp the women's family members would come to 'check out' what was happening. For the first two camps there were continuous efforts to take the women back on some pretext or the other. 'There are guests at home, who will cook? The children are sick...'

*In Pushpa's case her husband and her brother came and said that her children had disappeared. Pushpa was convinced that they were lying and so she told them to go to the police station and file a report and that she would come in a while. After they left, Pushpa went to the village with us but she did not go to her house. She asked acquaintances about her children and came to know that they were fine. She came back to the camp with saying anything to anyone...*

After 11 camps people's perception of the camp has changed. Today when we organize a camp there are some women who only need to know the date and place and they come on their own. This change in attitude and that too with respect to literacy is indeed heartening.

### ***Camp Pedagogy***

There was a focus on literacy at the camps. This was in keeping with our vision and strategy for the camps and it also responded to the women's clear articulation that it was for literacy that they had come. Special emphasis was placed on creating an environment which was conducive to women engaging in learning. Apart from literacy, attention was also paid to discussions on social issues.

### ***Literacy Session***

There were literacy sessions of eight hours every day, out of which four were for language literacy and four for numeracy. Groups for language and numeracy were made on the basis of the learner's levels. Everyday the progress of each learner was assessed and planning done on the basis of the assessment. Groups were small enough so that each learner could receive individual attention. These groups were not rigid. If some one learnt faster, she moved to the next group.

### *Issue Based Sessions*

In the evening a two hour session was dedicated to discussing and building an understanding on a particular social issue. Issues such as gender, patriarchy, violence against women, dowry, caste, and health were discussed in such a manner that the women could relate them to their lives and experiences. We used many different methods to deepen understanding and to generate discussions, including the use of plays, films, and newspaper reports. The camp provided the women and girls the space to learn literacy skills as well as engage with other aspects of their lives.

### *The camp environment*

The atmosphere at the camp was consciously such that there was no distance between the teacher and the learners. Everyone ate, slept and lived in the camp together. Due to this women could freely talk to their teacher. Often after a whole day of learning they would sit with the teacher even at night trying to strengthen their literacy skills. To improve their newly acquired skills they would write letters to each other and the teachers in the night. In their letters a lot of women wrote about their personal problems. Many times during the camp issues cropped up that made us put aside literacy and take up the issues.

Some examples:

*Sukhwati of Kusmad village brought up the issue of the marriage of her younger sister to a man much older than her and sought our help. During the camp some of us went and spoke to her family, and were able to stop the marriage.*

*When Anita was coming to attend her fourth literacy camp, her husband hit her with a sickle in an attempt to prevent her. Despite the beating Anita showed tremendous courage and came to the camp. This issue was taken up by the women in the camp and a group of them went to Anita's village and rebuked her husband.*

It is important to realize that working on women's education cannot be narrowly in its focus, it necessitates an engagement with their lives.

### *Teaching learning material*

To prepare teaching materials for women and adolescent girls it is important to ensure that the material is gender sensitive, simple and easy to identify with. As evidenced in the section of this paper outlining the context, most literacy programmes for women and adolescent girls use materials which are didactic, simplistic and uninteresting. In the camps we strove to steer clear of these dangers. The primers made for language learning consciously tried to incorporate words from the local language. An effort was made to enable women to express themselves by using their newly learnt skills of reading and writing through letters and ne. women to put their thoughts on paper easily along with learning to read and write.

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### ***D. Follow up Action after the camp***

One of the major problems of literacy programmes is that at the end of the literacy phase importance of literacy disappears.<sup>viii</sup> In the post literacy phase or in the women's education follow-up the emphasis is on disbursing information to the women. The main reason for this is that it is not clear how to sustain literacy nor is there any material for post literacy work. It is very important that women going through literacy should in some manner be able to use their literacy skills in an independent manner and should be able to express their view in writing. Keeping all these things in view, exercises for the follow up phase and a follow-up programmes were chalked out. For this the women participants in the camp were to motivate to actively link up with the village center and work on sustaining newly acquired literacy skills.

Another activity that has been introduced to help women sustain their literacy is to bring out a newsletter. Every other month about 20 women come and stay at the Block office for 3 days. They put together the information about their village, problems, issues, stories and write them in the local language. They then work on the design and layout of the newsletter. They have named it the "JANI PATRIKA" the women's newsletter. This is distributed in all the villages. So far the women have put together 5 issues of this newsletter. When the newsletter is read in the village they proudly and confidently proclaim that they have written in the news letter.

Today we not only have a bond with literacy but we have an individual bond with these women and adolescent girls. More importantly, follow-up is not only on literacy but on the lives of these women and adolescent girls also.

*Sheela, who had never held a pen and paper. She managed to come to 2 camps with great difficulty. But whenever we go to the village she gets her books and sits with us. Not only that sometime she manages to convince her sons to consolidate their literacy.*

*Jaleb's brother sent her to her in-laws place forcibly during the camp itself. Whenever she comes to her parent's house she makes it a point to visit the literacy center.*

*There were 25 adolescent girls who have studied in the camp. Some were dropouts because there was no school for them after class V. To study further they had to travel 15 -20 kms. Some were there because they were not taught well in their school. They had passed class 5, 6, 7 but knew nothing. Adolescent girls who went back to the village from the camp shared their experiences on camp activities and literacy skills with their friends. As a result adolescent girls who went to school also enrolled for the camp. Many girls such as Mira, Ramkuwanr, Lakshmi, Rajkumari, Bhagwati etc who participated in the camp have tried to further their education.*

*Parvati who had never even seen a school in today is in the post literacy phase. She dreams to make "JANI PATRIKA" the mouthpieces for women to protest the injustices meted out to them.*

*Gyarsi and Anita wanted to consolidate their literacy and now they are teachers in the program.*

## **5. IMPORTANT OUTCOMES OF THE CAMPS:**

### ***a. FOR WOMEN'S LITERACY OPPORTUNITY AND AMBIENCE ARE IMPORTANT***

Two years of experience in conducting camps has shown us that women do not find education non-rewarding. It seems to be non-rewarding when it is seen separated from their lives. Usually literacy programmes only teach alphabets and signatures. And when the women do not find anything new or challenging and are not able to relate the acquired skills with their lives they find literacy a non-rewarding exercise. Often no importance at all is given to women's knowledge and experience. Working with women and adolescent girl's means getting to know their lives and constantly being a part of their lives. It is not possible to work on women's literacy and women's issues separately as these are closely linked and intertwined.

During our literacy camp we tried to work with both. Not only did we link the women's identity, their work and the violence that they face to literacy, we also tried to link their traditional festivals and moments of happiness to learning. We tried to create an atmosphere where women could talk about and write about their views with ease. Whenever the women got a chance, be it day or night, they would be involved in consolidating what they had learnt. Late in the night when they were told to sleep they would promptly retort that once they went back they could sleep but right now they wanted to learn as much as possible as soon as possible.

During the camp the women were told about the subsidized food grains (Rations), and they expressed the situation of their village through posters. They showed how the contractor did not give them the subsidized food grains and when he did it was at a much higher rate. Information did not remain restricted to the camp. Whatever information they garnered at the camp vis a vis the subsidized food grains, law etc., they used it when they went back to the village.

*For example, after learning about the subsidized food grains Pushpa fought with the contractor for her share and took it. Moreover she told him that enough was enough and he could no longer make a fool of them.*

### ***b. LINK BETWEEN LITERACY AND EMPOWERMENT***

When the women came to the camp, they found it difficult to believe that they had come without the men folk. Today when they come to the camp taking a bus by themselves they feel empowered from within. There are several incidents where women women have felt empowered on using their literacy. The women of Luharra, Patha and Khatora village refused to vote by thumb impression and insisted on signing their names. Asked by the village people how they had learnt to sign, they proudly said that they went to camp to study.

In Manikpur village when Kesar added up the accounts after shopping she found that some money was missing. She immediately totaled up her express on the paper and went to the shopkeeper to ask for her balance. The shopkeeper questioned her literacy and Kesar showed him the accounts on the paper. The shopkeeper had to return the balance. There are many such examples when women have made literacy their tools and being literate they feel empowered. These women may not have taken big leaps but their small steps are important in themselves. And this is the beginning of empowerment.

### ***c. INFLUENCES OF CASTE ON WOMENS LITERACY AND EDUCATION***

Working with women and adolescent girls in the field of literacy and education gave us an experience of the influences of caste also. When we spoke of a women's literacy and educational center we were told what use was it educating a dalit because they had no brains. We were told that they were dirty and we should concentrate on the women of the other castes. But the most bitter experience was when we were taking the women to the camp the pradhan of a village provoked the dalits by saying that we were going to sell their women and they should bring their women back. The dalits fell for it and sent the pradhan to us. When we did not entertain him, he spiced things up and said we were holding the women, captive, beating them up and starving them. Scared the men came to look for their wives and daughters. What they saw amazed them and it was an eye opener for them to realise the lies the pradhan had cooked up.

An absolutely revealing experience was to see the caste discrimination amongst the Dalit women. Those belonging to the *dhobi* (who wash other people's clothes) caste were not allowed to sit with other Dalit caste. Nor could they serve anyone. We continuously worked on this issue of caste discrimination in the camp. We also asked them why they felt bad when other people discriminated against them when in their own caste they had so much of discrimination. It was important to understand and do away with this kind of discrimination. Then by citing their discrimination we could talk to them about intercaste discrimination effectively.

### ***6. CONCLUSION***

Women's literacy and education are not priority concerns of the national government today. However, we have found through our experience of conducting literacy camps that literacy plays a very important role in the empowerment of women. Whenever literacy programmes have been able to make connections with women's lives, with issues of empowerment and have ensured that literacy is used by women in real situations they have worked. We hope that the ground level situation of programmes like the one we described will be able to influence policies and practices of women's literacy and more importantly, make a case for greater priority being paid to this issue.

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i "Owing to the preoccupation with achieving the target of 'total literacy', there has been significant fudging/over-estimation of achievement figures ..." Arun Ghosh Committee, GOI 1994, p.30.

ii The government's inaction is in contravention to the commitments expected from it from international covenants and declarations. CEDAW, 1993 (Article 10) states that the "State parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education." The Beijing declaration, 1995 states that member nations "shall promote people-centred sustainable development ... through the provision of basic education, literacy and training ...." World Conference on Education for All, Jomtien, recognises that the 'most urgent priority is to ensure access to and improve the quality of education for girls and women ... all gender stereo-typing in education should be eliminated.' Goal 4 of the outcome document of the World Conference of Education Dakar is "To achieve 50% improvement in levels of literacy by 2005" ; And Goal 5, commits India to "Promoting gender equality in basic and continuing education of good quality."

iii In the 10<sup>th</sup> year plan (2002-2007) the government has set aside less than 5% of the budget for education, which includes adult women's education.

iv Perhaps the most important failure of the strategies to achieve universal adult literacy has been with respect to post-literacy. The need for continuity from the literacy campaign phase to post-literacy, though often conceded at the conceptual level, has almost always been ignored in practice. ... the delay between literacy and post-literacy phases and the resultant break leading to a relapse into illiteracy ..." pg 288. Athreya & Chunkath.

v The review of part of the visualizing of a programme for Literacy and Livelihoods that DFID ( ) has planned to sponsor in India.

vi The exceptions to this are the evaluations of adult literacy programmes in the districts. These evaluations however tend to focus only on assessing the extent to which targets relating to literacy have been met.

vii The study entitled Action Research Study on Educational Opportunities for Rural Women was conducted in Karnataka, Rajasthan, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. It has been published in