

UNESCO REGIONAL CONFERENCE IN SUPPORT OF GLOBAL LITERACY

“Addressing the Literacy Challenge in South, South-West and Central Asia: Building Partnerships and Promoting Innovative Approaches”¹

(Shantha Sinha-Chairperson, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights)

Mrs. Sonia Gandhi. Shri Arjun Singh ji, First Lady, Koichiro Matsuura, Mr. Rath and distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

It is indeed a great honor to take part in the UNESCO Regional Conference “Addressing the Literacy Challenge in South, South-West and Central Asia: Building Partnerships and Promoting Innovative Approaches”.

All of us gathered today know that what we are, what we think and do, how we dream, and grapple with our lives on a day to day basis, and philosophize and draw meaning to our existence is inextricably shaped by literacy and education. Our modern world about which there is a lot to be awfully proud of, mainly in the realm of ideas and celebration of the invincibility of human rights is so much to do with literacy. The crystallization of the finest of human values and sentiments and shared wisdom and multiplicity of perspectives about our very beings has so much to do with communicating through literacy. Simply because we are literate, we are together today in this conference, transcending boundaries of language, culture, nation to meet, empathize with and act in solidarity for all those who have been left behind.

We know that the lives of these illiterate persons who have been left behind are that of fear and anxiety, a loss of self-esteem, and vulnerability. Since two thirds of all illiterate persons are women this gets compounded further resulting in their incapacity to access all their entitlements as a matter of right. The biggest divide between those who have and the have-nots is that of literacy in the world today. Notably, once a person becomes literate the likelihood of a literate progeny is significant and degree of exposure and confidence associated with the empowerment process is greater. In this sense, appropriate structural intervention and State and societal support which focuses on addressing the first time learner creates multi-generational impact. It is so practical and doable if the process of inclusion is based on the wholehearted support of all concerned especially those in the echelons of power and establishment. And its impact is profound – the notions of solidarity, inclusion, empowerment all extend not only from the attainment of education but also the process which enables its attainment.

India has been witness to some of the large-scale movements for literacy involving millions of volunteers – the kala jatha cultural campaigns being important testaments to their role in fostering social mobilization of peace, solidarity and active citizenship. Volunteers are at the core of such endeavors to reach out to the illiterate, which recognise the potential of literacy for individuals as well as for societal transformation. Within their enthusiastic struggle to empower their learners are also the heart rendering stories about the emergence of the poorest, and women as campaigners in the movement for literacy.

¹ This address was delivered at the UNESCO Regional Conference held on 29-30 November, 2007 in Delhi.

For all these 'campaigners' it is a process of becoming active citizens who exercise choices, seize opportunities, discover their potential, take part in public action and demand equity and social justice. The poetry, literature, music and songs which emerge in abundance when the new learner is welcomed to the portals of the literate world – not only open a world of ideas and give voice to their living history and emerging citizenship but also lead them beyond local and national boundaries. The small black and white story books of the NGO BharatGyanVigyanSamithi for example, which have translated some of the greatest literature from around the world are more than just literacy aids - they are the portal to pluralistic ideas and values and world citizenship. The act of giving the gift of literacy by the ordinary local volunteer in such a charged atmosphere and the relationship with the neo-literate whose thirst for knowing is boundless, is one of aesthetics and beauty. It is also the moment of unfolding of a new layer in society for enabling and ensuring freedom and dignity.

In places where there has been a near collapse of the fabric of society where citizens live in fear and mutual suspicion, new spaces have been created through the movements for education. Respect for one another, dialogue and discussion among ones own has started. The process of peace and reconciliation has generated new possibilities among citizens for constructive action. Undoubtedly this march towards imagining humanity and a world citizenry founded on plural values would be further enriched with inclusion of each of us in a literate society.

The challenge in taking such movements forward has always been in institutionalizing the ground swell of local action. The message sent by the State and the earnestness with which it gives a call to action for such fundamental and transformative empowerment is of the utmost importance. When utmost faith in its people and their capacities is evidenced by the State's commitment, local actions emerge, which go beyond the expectations of the government. In fact it has been seen time and again how a community can take ownership of the idea, spread its wings and offer all that it has to make education happen including breaking down many exclusionary barriers, as if it was waiting for this call from its government leaders.

The mantra is to trust the local. It is so easy. This process of building thought and action of the local has profound impact on the lives of all of us. The issues of social justice and equity, access to services and State obligation, citizenship and participation, democracy no longer remain abstract notions, but become to the focal points of concern within the context of the concrete realities and predicament of the poor. The seeds of deepening democracy are sown in this process of articulation, debate and discussion and resolution of differences in perspectives, enabled by simple literature and study material. There is something very organic about capturing the imagination of everyone in the process of making a literate society. A non-violent, silent social transformation for citizenship and rights is launched in this process.

Since several of these ideas challenge normative ways of thinking and doing things, they do question the existing social and cultural hierarchies and power structures. And it seems that at this point taking sides becomes inevitable. However, the strengthening of the community forums which emerge, serve to strengthen collective democratic processes through local consensus building in favor of the democratization of existing structures and practices. Universalisation means empowerment at the local level.

In this way the struggle for the right to education can be seen as part of the struggle for citizenship. Full citizenship depends on recognising not only the rights embedded within it but the catalysing role of education in accessing a number of other fundamental rights through it. Our 86th constitutional amendment five years forcefully legitimised the central role of this right as our nation's most urgent imperative today. I am greatly heartened by the shared vision for transformation and the highest level of importance and urgency accorded to literacy and education by the world leaders and policy makers gathered here today -I urge you all to continue to support your passionate and visionary educationists in their endeavours. I am sure that I stand together with all who are gathered here today in also asking for the continued support by governments and multilateral agencies such as UNESCO of this fundamental platform for active citizenship and access to rights. It is a platform, which Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi saw as the key to reduced violence in society as well as one, which would cultivate secularism, socialism, democracy, and moral values. Through the National Literacy Mission, Prime Minister Gandhi brought education to the centre stage of India's democracy – we must ensure that, this is where it remains.