

Literacy to Self-Reliance

Empowering Women, Empowering the Nation

In countries like India, where there exists an acute problem of poverty, distress migration to earn basic livelihood is very rampant. In spite of a thriving economy, and India being viewed as developed country by 2020, 40 % (i.e. around 41 Cr) of the Indian population is illiterate. Owing to this, India is host to the largest mass of unemployed population. The condition of women is even worse, with illiteracy being as high as 65% in some cases. In a stark contrast to their urban counterparts, these illiterate women are confined to a few household chores having no authority in even basic family decision making and no opportunity for productive employment. These women just resort to their fate with illiteracy serving as the main catalyst for their oppression.

The discrepancy in the ideology and practice of the empowerment policy of women in India constitutes its continued social, economic and social backwardness. Women make up 52% of our country's population. Hence, there can be no progress unless their needs and interests are fully met. Empowerment would not hold any meaning unless they are made strong, alert and aware of their equal status in the society. Policies should be framed to bring them into the mainstream of society. It is important to educate the women. This should certainly be the need of the hour, as education of women will lead to their empowerment, and this would further have a significant impact on the nation's development. Education, thus, holds the key to development.

Taking all these factors into consideration, TARA proposed establishment of a robust system that will first make women literate, then strengthen their income generation environment through various activities and simultaneously increase their livelihood and income generating opportunities. This formed the basis of a CSR initiative of the Noida Power Company Limited (NPCL), Greater Noida and the project began in September 2011 with 122 women from three villages in Greater Noida.

The project's initial objective was to start with 100 women from different clusters in Surajpur, Kasna and Kulesra villages, and make them literate through the TARA Akshar+ programme; then impart 75 of them with basic life skills; further, 50 women were to be trained on vocational skills and 25 of these were to be trained on enterprise development training.



The components and activities of this project include:

- a) Functional Literacy: Provided through one of the world's fastest literacy programme (as per the Wall Street Journal), TARA Akshar+, is a laptop based functional literacy programme, which can train an illiterate person to read & write and provide basic numerical skills in just 98 contact hours (2 hours daily spanning over 49 days)

- b) Life Skills Training: Post basic literacy, modules imparting life skills training aimed at enhancing the personality and knowledge of individuals on health, hygiene and related aspects, ultimately leading to increased employability opportunities.
- c) Vocational Skills Training: As the next step, participants would be trained in various vocational skills aimed at securing jobs
- d) Enterprise Development Training: Depending on the business acumen of the participants, enterprise development training would be provided, aimed at helping them set up Micro-Enterprises
- e) Linkages Facilitation: Post trainings, TARA would facilitate in setting up micro-enterprises, link these with financial institutions/ banks and also create market linkages for selling products/ services

Literacy Scenario in the targeted areas:

The programme finally began with 122 women instead of the targeted number of 100 women with TARA Akshar+, which laid the foundation for the empowerment mission. This happened during the mobilization process, where while mobilizing 100 women, 22 more women joined the day the center started and they were determined that they would not leave and will also study. Seeing their determination and overwhelming response, these women were also accommodated. In all 122 women were addressed and made literate.

For the convenience of the students and also to enable to bring the benefits of the programme to their door steps, two to three sub-centers were organized locality wise and made operational. This showed the versatility and flexibility of organizing the sub centers.

While carrying out the initial survey of the students it was observed that Satyavati, member Block Development Committee (BDC), whose primary job is to monitor the development works in the block, was totally illiterate. She was asked by the Master Trainer to join the TARA Akshar+ Course, which she did. There was not a single drop-out once the course started and the result of the examination held at the end was 100% pass percentage.

Impact of the programme: After completion of the TARA Akshar+ course, an informal feedback session was conducted to assess the outcomes and impacts it produced on the participants. A general feeling that was observed after having become literate was:

- They were even more determined to make their children attend school
- They now had the confidence to demand and use preventative medical and hygiene facilities
- They expected to be able to deal more easily with issues of family health
- They now felt their worth in the family and community had gone up considerably
- They would now like to follow up with further training, especially with a view to getting jobs

Life Skills Training:

Life skills education forms an integral part of vocational training programmes. The goal is to develop confident individuals capable of self-directed growth and to provide them with the 'soft skills' they need in order to be successful and self-sufficient adults. It also provides them with a deeper understanding and awareness of self that helps individuals establish a good attitudinal foundation as well as a basis for long term professional and personal development. Life skills empower an individual to make informed decisions in their life. Effective acquisition of life skills can influence the way one feels about oneself and others and can enhance one's productivity, efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence. It also enables a person to deal effectively with the demands and challenges confronted in everyday life.



Thus, soon after the literacy, the training on life skills began, where the participants learnt about identity, goals and expectations, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats), attitude, self-esteem. Besides, they will also be taught about some social and interpersonal skills like gender; values and perceptions; balancing relationships; decision making; communication skills; conflict resolutions; and handling responsibilities.

The participants initially did not understand the importance of life skills, but slowly and gradually, as this training was made part of the vocational training, it has gained acceptance and women now look forward to understand, learn new concepts and share their own experiences. One can easily observe the change that has been brought about in the lives of these women.

Vocational Training:



Post-literacy programme, training needs assessment carried out for all the women through personal interviews and focused group discussions, helped understand the needs and desires of the participants. Accordingly, vocational training was planned for them and has been initiated alongside the life skills programme. The women in some clusters were quite hesitant in undergoing the vocational training initially and insisted that they enjoy studying and would want to

continue doing the same. But soon after the vocational training (stitching and tailoring) began, the women are enjoying the learning experience. They are looking forward to completing the whole process soon, learn how to stitch designer garments and to start their own enterprises or get employed in this field. It is interesting to observe how these women refuse to take an off even on Sundays and are always at their centres before the usual time.

The confidence and high levels of self-esteem reflects on their faces. There has been a tremendous change in the thinking and attitude of these women towards life. They now understand the importance of education and being empowered, not just for their children, but also for themselves as adults and more importantly as WOMEN.

