

# Commonwealth of Learning Asa Briggs Lecture

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*Commonwealth of Learning Asa Briggs Lecture: "Educate Girls"*

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Honourable Chair Whiteman; Sir John Daniel; Vice-Chancellor of IGNOU, Professor V.N. Rajasekharan Pillai; Professor Ramanujam, who delivered a generous and inspired welcome to me today; ladies and gentlemen; friends:

It is a privilege, to deliver this lecture in honour of one of the great historians of our times, Baron Asa Briggs, former Chancellor of Britain's Open University Like me but at a far more distinguished level, Lord Briggs has, over the years, combined an interest in history with a fondness for literature and a deep involvement with the media. The idea that the media is a vital agent and catalyst for social change has never been better expounded than by Asa Briggs, and my only regret is that that was not the subject that the organizers of today's events wished me to address! Instead, I will attempt, as requested, to do justice to the broader themes of your conference this week, focusing on the challenges of education and literacy, social justice, community development, skills development and formal education in relation to open learning. I am far from an expert on any of these themes, but hope to offer you an outsider's perspective on them.

Of all the many paradoxes with which India abounds, the saddest must be that we are a country where nearly half the population is illiterate but which has produced the world's second largest pool of trained scientists and engineers. A country which invents more sophisticated software for U.S. computer manufacturers than any other country in the world, and yet in which there are at least 35 million children who have not seen the inside of a school.

For those who care about illiteracy, India is the largest country in a subcontinent that gives great cause for concern. South Asia has emerged as the poorest, the most illiterate, the most malnourished, and the least gender-sensitive region in the world, with over half the world's illiterate adults and 40 per cent of the

world's out-of-school children. South Asia has by now the lowest adult literacy rate (49 per cent) in the world. It has fallen behind Sub-Saharan Africa (at 57 per cent), even though in 1970 South Asia was ahead. Thirty-seven per cent of all Indian primary school children drop out before reaching the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. We have a shortage of schools and a shortage of teachers, and the problem gets worse every year because of population growth. Our subcontinent has the worst teacher-pupil ratio in the world. The illiterate population of India exceeds the total combined population of the North American continent and Japan. The work of basic education has never been more needed.

India has made only uneven progress in educating its population. Whereas most districts in Kerala, following the introduction of free and compulsory education by an elected Communist government in 1957, have attained 100 per cent literacy, the national literacy level still hovers around the halfway mark; the current figure is 62 per cent. Kerala has a literacy rate of nearly 100 per cent while Bihar is only at 44 per cent. And Bihar has a female literacy rate of only 29 per cent.

The traditional explanation for the failure to attain mass education is two-pronged: the lack of resources to cope with the dramatic growth in population (we would need to build a new school every day for the next 10 years just to educate the children already born) and the tendency of families to take their children out of school early to serve as breadwinners or at least as help at home or on the farm. Thus, though universal primary education is available in theory, fewer than half of India's children between the ages of six and 14 attend school at all.

But official national policy has undoubtedly long been in favour of promoting basic education. As a child at school I remember being exhorted to impart the alphabet to our servants under the Gandhian "each one teach one" programme, and many of us were brought up on Swami Vivekananda's writings about the importance of education for the poor as the key to their uplift. But it is true that, 63 years after independence, progress has been inexcusably slow. Obviously, there were policy choices being made here. For our first six decades, India spent less than 4% of its GNP on education, only this year have we finally raised the level to 6%, to put money behind the new education reforms, in particular the Right to Education Bill. Successive governments before this have collectively spent only one-tenth of the amounts on education that they have committed to defence.

What is missing is not just financial resources, but a commitment on the part of our society as a whole to tackle the educational tasks that lie ahead. Indian politicians are all too quick to take refuge in sharp rejoinders about not drawing the wrong conclusions from the illiteracy figures. Education, some argue even today, is not always relevant to the real lives of village Indians, for India's illiterates are still smart, and illiteracy is not a reflection of their intelligence or shrewdness (which they demonstrate, of course, by voting for the very politicians who make such arguments). Fair enough, but Kerala's literate villagers are smart too.

That commitment is at last coming. There is a sea change in official attitudes to education, exemplified in the series of educational reforms being piloted through the current Parliament. These days there is even ambitious talk of turning India into a "knowledge society". The transformation of India into a knowledge society will depend on our capacity to provide and sustain knowledgeable citizens and workers. Currently the need for education at all levels, including continuing education, which is essential for upgrading skills and for equipping our people to face the challenges of the workplace, are largely unmet. For example,

fewer than 20 per cent of Indians reach high school, and less than 10 per cent graduate. In the case of higher education, only about 50 million out of India's population of 1.1 billion people have degrees beyond high school. Ironically, India has one of the largest higher education systems in the world, with over 350 universities and 16,000 colleges which produce more than 2.5 million graduates on an average every year. The problem is that, according to many corporate leaders, a majority of these graduates are unemployable without extensive retraining, and outside a few ivory towers of excellence, the system is failing to provide the knowhow that our society needs in its citizens and workers.

Now there has been good news. The adult literacy rate has more than tripled since 1951, from 18 per cent in 1951 to 62-66 today. (But one must be wary of these figures. UNESCO defines an illiterate person as one who cannot, with understanding, both read and write a short, simple statement on their everyday life. By that definition I suspect fewer than half our population would really qualify as literate.) The increase is even more dramatic for female literacy, from nine per cent to 43 percent in 2001. The gender gaps have been closing as female literacy increased much faster than male literacy.

The task of providing elementary education to all children is massive. India is making a major effort now to expand primary education. Our primary school system has become one of the largest in the world, with 150 million children enrolled. On a typical day, roughly 290 million students are attending classes somewhere in India. But it's not enough.

We hear more and more from progressive economists about the importance of what they call "human capital". Human capital is defined as the stock of useful, valuable, and relevant knowledge built up in the process of education and training. Literacy is the key to building human capital and human capital is the vital ingredient in building a nation. There is no industrial society today with an adult literacy rate of less than 80 per cent. No illiterate society has ever become an industrial tiger of any stripe.

A key strategy for creating sufficient and appropriate human capital is to focus on basic education for all children. As Gabriela Mistral has so poignantly said, "We are guilty of many crimes, but our worst sin is abandoning the child; neglecting the foundation of life. Many of the things we need can wait; The child cannot. We cannot answer Tomorrow. Her name is Today."

What is striking from the international experience is that whenever and wherever basic education was spread, the social and economic benefits have been quite striking and visible. The development strategies followed in recent decades by Japan, the East Asian industrialising tigers, and China laid a firm basis for equitable growth by massive investment in basic education for all. Literacy was fundamental not only to accelerating the economic growth of these countries, but to distributing resources more equitably and thereby to empowering more people.

It is a truism today that economic success everywhere is based on educational success. And literacy is the basic building block of education. It is not just an end in itself: literacy leads to many social benefits, including improvements in standards of hygiene, reduction in infant and child mortality rates, decline in population growth rates, increase in labour productivity, rise in civic consciousness, greater political empowerment and democratisation – and even an improved sense of national unity, as people become more aware than before of the country they belong to and the opportunities beyond their immediate horizons.

Education is also a basic component of social cohesion and national identity. The foundations for a conscious and active citizenship are often laid in school. Literacy plays a key role in the building of democracy; my home state of Kerala, where we find ourselves today, provides a striking example of how higher levels of literacy lead to a more aware and informed public. Adult literacy in Kerala is nearly 100 per cent, compared to the Indian average of 66 per cent. As a result, nearly half of the adult population in Kerala reads a daily newspaper, compared to less than 20 per cent elsewhere in India. One out of every four rural labourers reads a newspaper regularly compared to less than two per cent of agricultural workers in the rest of the country. So literacy leads directly to an improvement in the depth and quality of public opinion, as well as to more active participation of the poor in the democratic process.

This means that education plays an important role in the attainment of social justice. Educational institutions are expected to equip students to the best of their capabilities to secure a meaningful place in society. Education is also the great leveller, fostering a process of developing an egalitarian society. But when a large number of people are excluded from the educational system, they cannot participate meaningfully in the economic, social and cultural life of their communities. Educational reforms are thus required to address the needs of children who are particularly vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion. Access to education is a fundamental social need.

Access to education has to move beyond merely securing admissions in various courses and programmes leading to degree certificates and diplomas. The ultimate purpose of education must be the creation of awareness regarding livelihood, basic health, legal rights including human rights, and participation in all spheres of a democratic society – which places emphasis on inclusive growth and development.

The Indian constitution in its preamble advances the idea of social justice and equality of status and opportunity to all, and Article 14 establishes that the State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or equal protection of the law. Article 15 prohibits any kind of discrimination on grounds of caste, creed, sex, birth, etc. Nevertheless, access to several parameters of social justice is denied to many because of constraints emanating from discrimination, oppression, racism, classism, sexism, stereotyping and prejudice against certain sections of the society, a problem India shares with many developing countries. Access to education or the lack thereof, is another significant constraint in the pursuit of social justice.

Amartya Sen, the polymath Nobel laureate in Economics, has reminded us that “The elimination of ignorance, of illiteracy and of needless inequalities in opportunities [are] objectives that are valued for their own sake. They expand our freedom to lead the lives we have reason to value.” In his most famous poem, the other Nobel Prize-winning Bengali, the immortal poet Rabindranath Tagore, implicitly spoke of education as fundamental to his dream for India.

Where the mind is without fear  
and the head is held high;  
where knowledge is free;  
where the world has not been broken up  
into fragments by narrow domestic walls;  
where words reach out from the depth of truth;  
where timeless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way  
into the dreary desert sands of dead habit;  
where the mind is led forward by Thee  
into ever-widening thought and action,  
into that heaven of Freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

So it was in a place “where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; where knowledge is free” and “where the mind is led forward ... into ever-widening thought and action” that Tagore hoped his India would awake to freedom. Such a mind is, of course, one that can only be developed and shaped by education.

But more prosaically, illiteracy must be fought for practical reasons. How are we going to cope with the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the information age, if half our population cannot sign their name or read a newspaper, let alone use a computer keyboard or surf the Net? Tomorrow’s is the Information Age: the world will be able to tell the rich from the poor not by GNP figures, but by their Internet connections. Illiteracy and poor levels of educational attainment are self-imposed handicaps in a race we have no choice but to run.

India’s significant progress in developing information and communications technologies (ICT) can also be a major asset here. The use of ICT in expanding educational opportunities, particularly in supporting open learning, should not be underestimated. With improved broadband connectivity, ICT can allow a single teacher to reach a dozen classrooms in far-flung and remote areas of the country. ICT will also permit a focus on the role that open education resources play in enhancing the quality and reach of education.

India is never going to be a great 21<sup>st</sup> century power if it doesn’t educate its young – all of them, not just the ones who can afford an education. And what I say of India is true of every other developing country represented in this room today.

Absorbing new technologies, raising productivity levels, improving the competitiveness and quality of exports – all hallmarks of development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – all depend on the skills of a country’s workforce. In the countries of East Asia – the so-called “tiger economies” – labour productivity has been rising approximately by 10 per cent a year, and at least half of this can be attributed to investments made in education and technical skills.

There is an increasing need in India for skilled manpower across all sectors of the economy. With India’s increasing economic might, the big and growing gap between the demand for and supply of skilled people is widely felt. A study by the Observer Research Foundation concludes that by 2022 India will need to meet the target of “skilling and up-skilling” 500 million people. The target cannot be met by the Government of India alone or by conventional educational institutions. It has to be a combined effort by public and private institutions, embracing different government ministries, development partners, NGOs, private and faith-based providers, local community groups, educational institutions and the corporate sector. It will need new vocational training institutions that are yet to be established, as well as recourse to two important assets of the Indira Gandhi National Open University – community colleges and distance learning.

But we must start early, with India's young children. It is true that while the government recognises the needs, it has neither the resources nor the ability to deliver quality education to all of India's children. Education is a state subject in our federal constitution, so its quality varies widely, from Kerala's record in putting all children through school, to Bihar's female literacy rate of 29%. Our state governments have not been able to enroll all children between the ages of five and ten in school, nor are they able to retain the ones they enroll – some drop out because their families can't afford to keep them in school when they could be out to work in the fields or weaving rugs or making footballs, some because the teaching is so abysmal that they don't learn anything at school anyway. Ensuring that students achieve decent learning outcomes and acquire values and skills that enable them to play a positive role in their societies is a remote prospect. One ignores at one's peril the role of education in nurturing the creative and emotional growth of learners and helping them to acquire values and attitudes for responsible citizenship.

As I stated earlier, more Indian kids have never seen the inside of a school than those of any other country in the world. And those who have may not see a teacher, since we hold the world record for teacher absenteeism, or be given the books and learning materials without which the educational experience is incomplete.

Let us spare a thought for the poor teacher – in India teachers are too often underpaid, under-appreciated and therefore under-motivated. No wonder we have a nationwide shortage of 25 lakh (2.5 million) teachers, and several of those who do exist on the rolls, especially in our village pathshalas, don't actually teach: they show up once a month to collect their government salary and are AWOL the rest of the time. Teachers are, or should be, the biggest influence on their impressionable charges, at least after the parents. Their impact on young lives is profound and long lasting. They shape the character, curiosity level and intellectual potential of their students. In other words, they help shape our society. So far, under-valued and in many cases under-qualified, they are doing an uneven job.

How on earth can we maintain our much-vaunted economic growth rates if we don't produce enough educated Indians to claim the jobs that a 21<sup>st</sup> century economy offers? We rely on a handful of excellent private and missionary schools, a large number of uneven (but mostly hopeless) government schools, millions of kids with no schooling at all – and the efforts of a number, not large enough, of charitable organisations.

Of course, distance learning can be an important tool for ensuring access to quality education. The Somali Distance Education for Literacy Programme for example, teaches literacy, numeracy and life skills through weekly radio programmes, print materials and face to face instruction. In a country without a functioning government and an ongoing civil war, it has over 10, 000 registered learners, with at least 70 per cent of them women and girls in about 350 classes. Similarly, the Open School Society in India reaches out to over 100,000 learners, many of who are dropouts, children from the underprivileged castes and learners with disabilities. The programme also has the advantage of being able to provide equivalence with the formal educational system while remaining culturally and linguistically relevant to local needs. And for people with disabilities, especially those in remote rural areas, there is no substitute for distance learning.

India's National Sample Survey shows that the non-availability of schooling facilities in India accounts for about 10 per cent of the "never enrolled" in rural India and about eight per cent in urban India. The

difference between the sexes is larger in the urban areas. A large number of people, both in rural and in urban India, particularly women, cannot avail of the educational services because of their participation in household economic activities and other socio-economic reasons. In all such cases, the importance of distance learning cannot be overstated.

Education also plays a vital part in community development, broadly defined as a set of values and practices which permits a community to overcome poverty and disadvantage, knitting the society together at the grassroots and deepening democracy. Education is one of the most essential aspects of developed community. Throughout time, universities have played an important social role through the creation, preservation and the extension of knowledge to and within communities. Universities cannot afford to remain as oases of excellence when the communities sustaining them are silently turning into deserts.

The linkage between universities and communities is vital. There is a need for universities to reach out to communities, and make their policies and structures more flexible and relevant to community development. Community based learning enriches coursework by encouraging students to apply the knowledge and analytical tools gained in the classroom to the pressing issues that affect local communities. A useful example of the advantages of community based learning is soil fertility, management (SFM) in Western Kenya. Farmers and researchers used community based learning approaches and jointly developed an approach built on farmers' folk ecology and outsiders' knowledge, while going beyond methods that were merely curriculum-driven. Similarly, the "Learning for Farming" Programme in several Commonwealth countries has been advantageous in linking farmers to the information that can help them improve their livelihoods.

Community radio can be another beneficial tool for community based learning. It can play an essential role in giving young people the skills that can lead to better livelihoods and help them seek employment or self employment. It can also raise awareness on health, which is also a developmental challenge in several developing countries. Community radio can provide non-formal educational opportunities, especially for communities that are not fully literate. Radio dramas, storytelling and interviews in particular, are effective and low cost ways of making community voices an integral part of the learning process. In addressing the challenge of learning for development, open and distance learning can play a particularly important role, building a bridge between knowledge acquisition and skills development and the potential to reduce the inequalities of access that blight conventional education in most countries.

But since I have mentioned gender difference, it is also essential to focus on that specific aspect of the educational challenge in our country today. The saddest aspect of India's literacy statistics is the disproportionate percentage of women who remain illiterate. Sixty per cent of India's illiterates are women. Female literacy (43 per cent) was 26 percentage points below the male literacy (69 percent). No society has ever liberated itself economically, politically, or socially without a sound base of educated women.

One of the more difficult questions I used to find myself being asked when I was a United Nations official, especially when I have been addressing a generalist audience, is: "what is the single most important thing that can be done to improve the world?" It's the kind of question that tends to bring out the bureaucrat in the most direct of communicators, as one feels obliged to explain how complex are the challenges confronting humanity; how no one task alone can be singled out over other goals; how the

struggle for peace, the fight against poverty, the battle to eradicate disease, must all be waged side-by-side – and so mind-numbingly on. But of late I have cast my caution to the winds and ventured an answer to this most impossible of questions. If I had to pick the one thing we must do above all else, I now offer a two-word mantra: “educate girls”.

It really is that simple. There is no action proven to do more for the human race than the education of the female child. Scholarly studies and research projects have established what common sense might already have told us: that if you educate a boy, you educate a person, but if you educate a girl, you educate a family and benefit an entire community.

The evidence is striking. Increased schooling of mothers has a measurable impact on the health of their children, on the future schooling of the child, and on the child’s adult productivity. The children of educated mothers consistently out-perform children with educated fathers and illiterate mothers. Given that they spend most of their time with their mothers, this is hardly surprising.

A girl who has had more than six years of education is better equipped to seek and use medical and health care advice, to immunize her children, to be aware of sanitary practices from boiling water to the importance of washing hands. A World Bank project in Africa established that the children of women with just five years of school had a 40% better survival rate than the children of women who had less than five years in class. A Yale University study showed that the heights and weights for newborn children of women with a basic education were consistently higher than those of babies born to uneducated women. A UNESCO study demonstrated that giving women just a primary school education decreases child mortality by 5-10%.

The health advantages of education extend beyond childbirth. The dreaded disease AIDS spreads twice as fast, a Zambian study shows, among uneducated girls than amongst those who have been to school. Educated girls marry later, and are less susceptible to abuse by older men. And educated women tend to have fewer children, space them more wisely and so look after them better; women with seven years’ education, according to one study, had two or three fewer children than women with no schooling. The World Bank, with the mathematical precision for which they are so famous, has estimated that for every four years of education, fertility is reduced by about one birth per mother.

The more girls go to secondary school, the Bank adds, the higher the country’s per capita income growth. And when girls work in the fields, as so many have to do across the developing world, their schooling translates directly to increased agricultural productivity. The marvellous thing about women is that they like to learn from other women, so the success of educated women is usually quickly emulated by their uneducated sisters. And women spend increased income on their families, which men do not necessarily do (rural toddy shops in India, after all, thrive on the self-indulgent spending habits of men). In many studies, the education of girls has been shown to lead to more productive farming and in turn to a decline in malnutrition. Educate a girl, and you benefit a community: QED.

As my former UN colleague Catherine Bertini once put it: “If someone told you that, with just 12 years of investment of about \$1 billion a year, you could, across the developing world, increase economic growth, decrease infant mortality, increase agricultural yields, improve maternal health, improve children’s health and nutrition, increase the numbers of children – girls and boys – in school, slow down population



growth, increase the number of men and women who can read and write, decrease the spread of AIDS, add new people to the work force and be able to improve their wages without pushing others out of the work force – what would you say? Such a deal! What is it? How can I sign up?”

Sadly, the world is not yet rushing to “sign up” to the challenge of educating girls, who lag consistently behind boys in access to education throughout the developing world. And yet girls lag consistently behind boys in access to education throughout India, with the honourable exception of Kerala. Indeed, we have a long way to go: we boast one State, Bihar, which even enthroned an illiterate woman as Chief Minister – as if to showcase its abysmal figure of a 27 per cent female literacy rate, one of the worst on the planet. But her seven daughters did indeed receive an education – so perhaps, after all, there are grounds for hope.

Certainly, there is no better answer. The former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan put it simply: “No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, improve nutrition, promote health, including the prevention of HIV/AIDS, and increase the chances of education for the next generation. Let us invest in women and girls.”

Let us indeed do that. And let us educate boys too. We need to achieve 100 per cent literacy across the world, if we are to fulfil the aspirations we have all begun to dare to articulate, and rise to the development challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Thank you and Jai Hind!*

## Links

Dr. Tharoor's website <http://www.shashitharoor.in/>