

**SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE  
ON THE OCCASION OF INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY, 2014**

**Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi: 08-09-2014**

I am indeed happy to be present amidst you this afternoon in celebrating International Literacy Day. It is an occasion to remind ourselves of the significance of the ability to read and write. It is an opportunity to highlight the learning opportunities that can and should be taken up by those who want to learn these skills. It is a juncture when all the stakeholders reinforce their commitment to the common goals. Today, we celebrate the successful endeavours of individuals and organisations and we recognise those who have made an outstanding contribution for spreading adult literacy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2. Literacy leads to education in the full sense of the term. It results in the acquisition of essential knowledge and proficiency. These are the instruments for the effective functioning of an individual – both in his group and in the larger community to which he belongs. They empower him and enable him to broaden his horizons and work for his own interest and that of the larger community.

3. Literacy, in its contemporary definition, means “reading the world” rather than “the word”. It enables more perceptive and thus more effective exchanges of thoughts and ideas. These increase understanding and co-operation for achieving the objectives that a society collectively identifies. A literate - and, therefore, educated - society is better able to explore its way towards its inclusive economic and social well being through democratic means. Thus it follows that the more literate a society, the greater its overall integration, growth and development. The plan of action for eradication of illiteracy should, therefore, not only focus on the tangible aspects of literacy but also delve into its intangible and intrinsic aspects.

4. The Father of our Nation, Mahatma Gandhi once observed, “illiteracy is a sin and shame and must be eradicated”. Today, more than 67 years after our independence, where are we? The literacy rate has increased by four times from 18 % in 1951 to about 74 % in 2011. Despite this, our literacy level is below the world average of 84 %. A target of 80% has been set for achievement by the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Plan. In this period, we aim to also reduce the gender gap from 16 to 10 percentage points. However our progress in adult literacy has been uneven and wide disparities are still seen. While States like Kerala, Himachal Pradesh and Mizoram have done reasonably well, many other States are lagging behind. The Schedule Castes, Schedule Tribes, Minorities and other disadvantaged groups,

which constitute a sizeable part of our population, have very much lower rates of literacy. There is, thus, an urgent need to focus attention on these groups to help them to catch up so that we can move faster towards the national targets.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. Gender disparity in literacy is another important challenge. As we have been told, male and female literacy rates are 80.89 and 64.64 percent respectively. We need to do much better. Government of India rightly considers female literacy as a force multiplier for its social development programmes. In this context, I was glad to note that the National Literacy Mission has enhanced its focus on female literacy. If the Mission enables the Indian woman to take charge of her life and health and feel more confident in her immediate physical and social environment; if literacy helps her to overcome deprivation, discrimination and injustice, then we can say that an important objective has been achieved. As I have said before, our objective should be to bring the literacy rate not only at par with the world average but to the levels attained by the leading societies of the world.

6. I am happy to learn that the Saakshar Bharat Programme with institutional frame work at National, State, District, Block as well as Gram Panchayat level is operational in rural areas of low female literacy districts in the country. The Lok Shiksha Kendras established in over 1.5 lakhs Gram Panchayats are a good initiative. I am also pleased to learn of the “Volunteer–based mass campaign” approach of the programme - in which ‘Volunteers’ act as mobilisers, trainers and teachers of non-literates. I congratulate the Volunteers participating in these campaigns and thank them for their service for the cause of literacy.

7. I would also like to recognise the outstanding efforts of the ‘learners’, those neo-literates who have also responded to the Government programmes. They have enthusiastically participated in the ‘Assessment and Certification’ initiative introduced in 2010 to assess the literacy skills of adult learners. It is satisfying to see that since the introduction of this programme, about 2.86 crore learners have been certified as literate and awarded certificates by the National Institute of Open Schooling. I am told that groups of successful participants or ‘neo-literates’ as they are called, have been invited from various states to participate in today’s celebrations. I am sure they will be inspired to use their learning productively and spread its benefits. I would expect them to reinforce the efforts of Government and Voluntary Agencies by promoting the adult literacy programmes in their respective spheres of influence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

8. We have still miles to go to accomplish what we have set out to achieve. While the primary focus of Saakshar Bharat remains on imparting of functional literacy to adult non-literates, there is a growing demand for giving access to basic education to the neo-literates emerging from the literacy programmes. This is a good proposal; it will help the neo-literates make use of their learning; they will have the opportunity of access to the formal schooling that they never had . A beginning in this direction has been made through the “Equivalency Programme”.

9. I would stress that the success of our march towards total literacy in India will ultimately depend on two factors. One is meaningful and effective advocacy and, secondly, cooperation and support of society at large, to bring non-literates into the mainstream of literacy. Adult Education in India has, so far, been primarily the responsibility of Government with a degree of involvement of Voluntary Agencies. The National Literacy Mission Authority encourages the Corporate and Private sector to join the Government efforts and contribute by bringing in a variety of synergies. I am happy to learn that this has had a good response. I would, therefore, take this opportunity to call upon State Governments, Panchayati Raj Institutions on one hand and on the other, appeal all the stakeholders in a resurgent India – the Corporate and Private Sectors, Voluntary agencies and Civil Society Organisations - to work together, in unison and with greater vigour to realise this goal.

10. With these words, I would like to congratulate all the winners of Saakshar Bharat Awards 2014 and the Ministry of Human Resource Development for instituting these awards. I have no doubt that these awards will inspire further efforts in the direction of total literacy in India.

I thank the National Literacy Mission Authority and I wish the participants in this Programme great success in their endeavours.

Thank you

Jai Hind