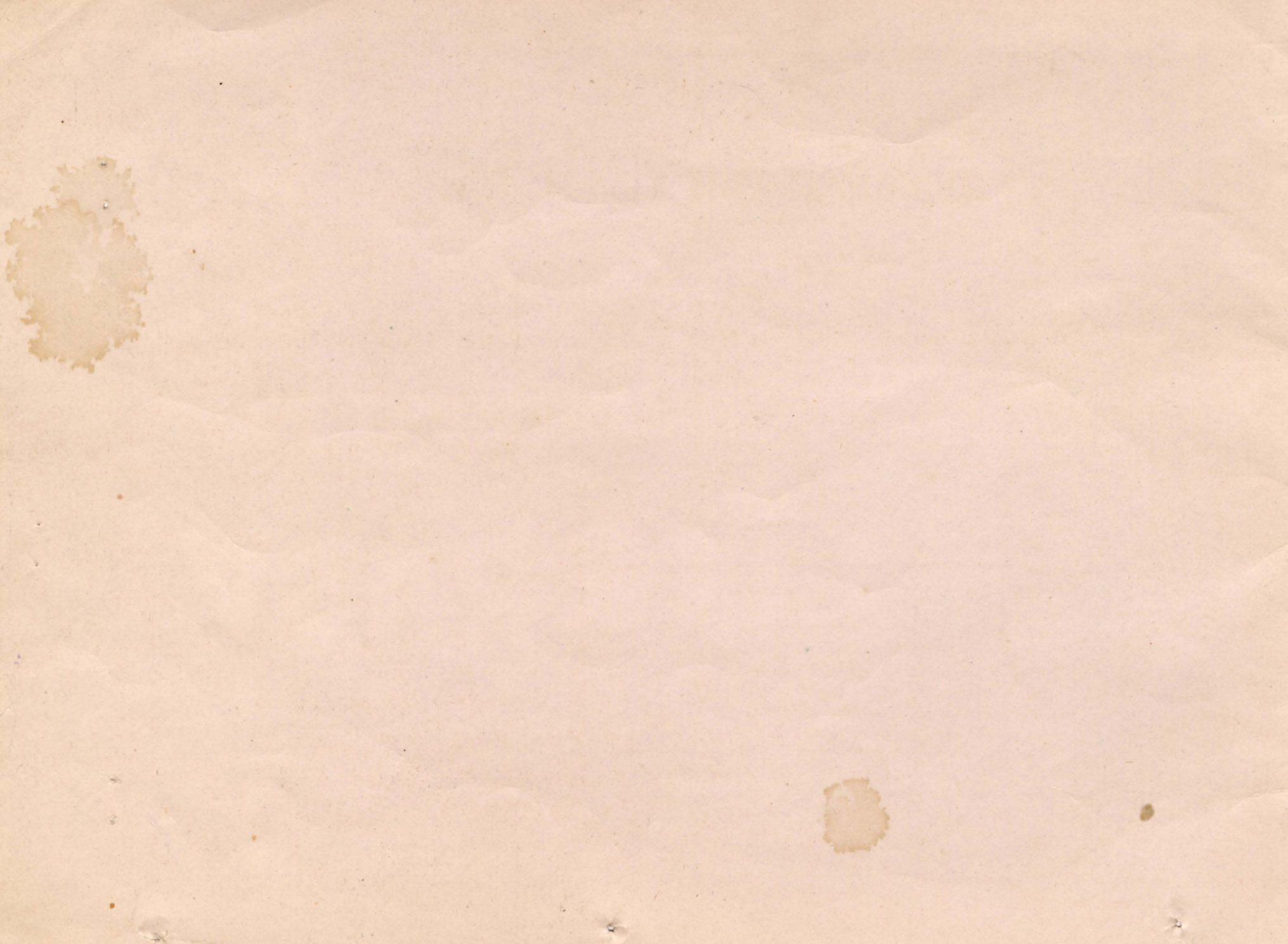




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COMMITMENT TO
LITERACY

SPEECHES OF PRIME MINISTER



COMMITMENT TO LITERACY

Speeches by Shri V.P. Singh, Prime Minister, at New Delhi and Cochin

DIRECTORATE OF ADULT EDUCATION

Government of India

Jamnagar House, Shahjahan Road

New Delhi-110 011



Speech by the Prime Minister on the occasion of the launching of International Literacy Year at Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi on 22.1.1990.

I am happy to be here with you for this important function. It is a cause for deep satisfaction that the UN General Assembly has declared 1990 as the International Literacy Year. This signifies the commitment of the world community to mass education. India has always supported such endeavours and this time too we will be in the vanguard of this international effort.

Literacy is the very foundation for the development of the people, and universalisation of literacy must receive the highest priority. Perhaps it would be appropriate to recall a statement from the great epic poem, the *Mahabharata* :

न हि मानुषात् कश्चित् महत्तरम् विद्यते

When Bheeshma Pitamaha fell on the 10th day of the war and was lying on a bed of arrows, in physical and mental anguish, he was approached by Yudhishtir who asked him, **“What is the Supreme Truth?”** Quick came the reply, **“There is nothing greater than man”**.

These lines, which were spoken thousands of years ago, are of continuing relevance even today. Human beings must be at the centre of the developmental process. Government programmes and policies must be aimed at ensuring that the

vast masses of our people are enabled to lead a better life. Education is, perhaps, the most important tool in this process for it is this which leads to a wider comprehension and understanding of society. In the absence of this, human beings tend to succumb to circumstances and are often at the mercy of the inter-play of forces surrounding them. This is even more so in a stratified society such as ours where human relationships sometimes tend to be governed by narrow and artificial considerations of caste, community and faith. We see literacy and mass education as an essential part of the development of our human resources and the emergence of a strong democratic and secular society in which each Indian will be able to find fulfilment.

Education must not be confused to mean only the accumulation of information. It must be concerned with raising human awareness and the development of moral values and character. Education must sensitize people to the needs of the poorest. Swamy Vivekananda said :

“The education which does not help the common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle of life, which does not bring out strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy, and the courage of a lion — is it worth the name?”

It is this spirit that we find sorely lacking today. Our young must imbibe the desire to excel and better themselves, but much more than that they must learn how to be good human beings.

Today we see a stark contrast between appalling poverty and ignorance on the one hand and material affluence coupled with a loss of faith in basic human values

and the breaking down of social institutions on the other. Having outdistanced time and space, human beings remain callous to the sufferings of their less fortunate brethren. True education must inculcate in our people respect for all human beings and a sensitivity to the needs of the poorest. This has to be the foundation of our education.

The objectives before the nation have been spelt out in the Constitution. We have to have an unswerving commitment to them. This is a commitment to brotherhood among people of different religions and communities, castes and creeds and to a genuine sense of equality. This is also a commitment to civilized, democratic norms not only in the Parliament and Legislatures, but in everyday life. We have to re-inforce these values with some additional national concerns: a respect for the environment, commitment to women's equality and observance of the small family norm. The education that we provide our young must make them good citizens, with a strong commitment to our national ideals and goals. No investment in this great and challenging task is too much.

We do not have unlimited resources and are faced with difficult choices. In the 8th Plan, we have to pay attention to programmes of health and family welfare, to alleviation of poverty, to conservation of the environment and at the same time, to industrial and agricultural development. However, human development, the development of men, women, and children is of the highest importance and we will review and re-order our plan priorities and strategies accordingly.

We have to ensure that primary education becomes available to all children as soon as possible. While we will pay attention to improvement of school facilities and educational materials, we will also go for cost effective options. By organising and mobilising people, by making the primary education system accountable to them, we should be able to secure the cooperation of those parents who at present do not send their children to school, or withdraw them before they complete primary education.

Unfortunately, a very large number of children in our country have to work. This is a matter of great shame and we have to put a stop to it as early as possible. We are also aware that a large number of girls stay at home to look after their younger brothers and sisters and to assist the family in domestic chores. Provision of creches and Early Childhood Care Centres, especially in rural areas, facilities for drinking water, fodder and fuel will release girls to attend primary schools. We will also have to strengthen programmes for part-time non-formal education. What I have in mind is the provision of flexible, condensed courses for boys and girls with the help of well-trained local teachers to enable working children to get primary education. These children should join the mainstream of education as soon as possible.

Another critical area is adult literacy. We recognise that imparting of literacy to an illiterate adult is not an easy task. The difficulty is made more complex by the unsatisfactory environment in which a literacy class is run, the poor quality of learning materials and lack of training instructors.

This has resulted in doubt and cynicism among politicians and educationists alike. But we have to ask ourselves the question whether we have any alternative to large scale literacy programmes. Can we forget about the educational needs of people who have crossed the age of schooling, those who are more than 15 or 16 years of age, and are completely deprived of learning opportunities? While radio and TV may play a role in informing and educating people, in modern times, it is unthinkable that people should remain illiterate. We have to work much harder than we have done so far to ensure that all people who are still below 30 or 35 years of age become literate, educated, capable of self-advancement, capable of making choices, and capable of working and learning together.

We will have to implement the literacy programme as a social mission. It will have to be a national campaign, a campaign which touches every heart and head. We shall have to involve all agencies - teachers, students, housewives, ex-servicemen and all sections of society. Educational institutions, voluntary organisations, employers in the public and private sector, cooperative societies and everyone will have to be asked to play their role in this challenging task.

On this occasion, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to all those people who are working in the sphere of education and to express the hope that well before the turn of the century, India will cease to be a predominantly illiterate country, but a country in which illiteracy was a thing of the past. I recall the moving lines of Rabindra Nath Tagore who said :

*Into the mouths of these
Dumb, pale and meek
We have to infuse the language of the soul
Into the hearts of these
Weary, worn and forlorn
We have to minstrel the hope of humanity*

With these words, I formally launch the International Literacy Year in our country. I seek the cooperation of all agencies of the Government at the Centre and in the States and of all our people across the length and breadth of the country to reinforce our commitment to literacy and people's education. In this lies our hope for a better future.

**Speech by the Prime Minister on the occasion of launching
of the Plan for Eradication of Illiteracy in Kerala declaring
the district of Ernakulam a fully literate district - Cochin
4.2.1990**

I am extremely happy to be here with all of you today on this momentous occasion. It is a great occasion because the district of Ernakulam today becomes the first district in our country to be fully literate. This is certainly a cause of celebration and pride not only for the citizens of Ernakulam and the people and government of Kerala but for the whole country. The occasion is doubly significant since, today, the whole State of Kerala with its population of 2.88 crores is demonstrating its resolve to be a fully literate State. Again it will be the first such State, but the pride of this achievement will be shared by us all.

The example of Kerala is an inspiration to the whole nation. We must treat this occasion not only as the conclusion of a great campaign to make a district literate or the start of an even greater campaign to make a State literate; we should treat this as a day to declare the resolve of the people of India to make India a fully literate country. All our people must have access to modern knowledge, knowledge of science, knowledge of health, and knowledge of the meaning of freedom, of dignity, of democracy.

The people of Kerala have not only taken upon themselves the challenge to make themselves literate, they have given a call to all States, all political parties, all teachers, and more than anything else to the youth of the country to eliminate the shame of illiteracy from our country. This is an essential prerequisite for enhancing the quality of life as we can see from Kerala's example, in terms of higher life expectancy, better receptivity to family planning and better health care. In all these areas, which are the indicators by which we should measure real development, Kerala is far ahead of the rest of the country and has reason to be proud of its achievements.

I am glad that the area approach which has been adopted in Kerala is now going to govern the entire National Literacy Mission. Area specific and time-bound programmes of complete eradication have been taken up in 20 CD Blocks of West Bengal and the State Government is thinking of taking up a project for complete literacy for Calcutta as a part of the celebration of the tricentenary of the great city. I believe similar area-based projects will be started in this International Literacy Year in Gujarat, U.P., Pondicherry and Goa, and perhaps in several other States as well.

I am particularly happy that the Ernakulam campaign, and the coming Kerala campaign covers all persons between the ages of 6 to 60. This double track approach of simultaneous efforts at universalisation of primary education and adult literacy is what is needed to achieve our goal of universal literacy.

I have no doubt that if we take up this whole movement for primary education as well as functional literacy for adults as a people's movement and a national mission, we shall be able to overcome the difficulties and hurdles.

We also have to be alert to the danger of a relapse to illiteracy unless a carefully prepared programme of post-literacy and continuing education is also taken up. There is the unfortunate instance of the large scale relapse to illiteracy in the famous Gram Shikshan Mohim of Maharashtra. Kerala has the famous Granthashala movement - I hope that it will be fully harnessed to provide opportunities to improve the skills, knowledge and information of persons who have recently become literate.

I do not want to under-estimate the difficulties that we face in achieving full literacy. There are strong socio-economic barriers which we have to transcend through imaginative policies and sustained efforts by the government and the people at all levels. In some parts of the country, such as Rajasthan and in my own State of U.P., there are several villages without any literate women - the whole atmosphere is static, there is little by way of movement. Students and youth will have to go from other places to spread literacy in such areas. Then there is the problem of finances. We have difficult choices before us, as I said while launching the International Literacy Year last month. However, whatever the claims and counter-claims whatever the difficulties, we are determined not to allow the area of human development to suffer. In this context, I would like to particularly appreciate the way the literacy programme is being run in this State, with emphasis on voluntary

participation and on creation of an environment in which it is no more possible for illiterate people to stand aside as onlookers. The social pressure, the atmosphere of moral compulsion created by various methods is something we should emulate in other parts of the country.

I am particularly happy that the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, which is famous for the People's Science Movement and has played a catalyst's role in Ernakulam, will also play a similar role in the whole State. I would like to congratulate and thank the KSSP people, particularly Dr. M.P. Parameswara and all his dedicated colleagues. I am also very impressed by the leadership provided by the Collector of this district, and also of Kottayam. I have always believed that District Collectors have to function as agents of positive change. I would like to send a letter to all District Collectors asking them to provide leadership in mass education, as has been done by the Collectors of Ernakulam and Kottayam. I must also compliment the NSS students and Vice-Chancellor of Gandhiji University, Kottayam who have done a magnificent job in that city. The list of all the people who have provided leadership in this outstanding achievement is very long, but I cannot fail to mention the names of Shri Panicker of KANFED, Justice Krishna Iyer and, of course, the Chief Minister and Education Minister of the State who have been behind the whole movement.

The final credit for the campaign must, of course, go to all the people who have worked with great commitment. It is ordinary people — students, teachers and

youth who work day and night to make a success of such movements. I would like to express the nation's gratitude to them and hope that this is the beginning of our conquest of illiteracy. I would like to call upon the youth of the country to come together in this 'mohim', this movement, which has the capacity to transform the atmosphere of cynicism and alienation into a new resilience, a new vigour and a new hope.

We have a long way to go, but Kerala has shown the way. Let me say once again how happy I am in declaring Ernakulam the first fully literate district of the country, and also in launching the plan of the Government of Kerala for complete eradication of illiteracy in the whole State.

