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Free to learn or fail

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Posted online: 2010-08-26 23:44:27+05:30

In his keynote address to the general session of the American Library Association's annual conference held in Chicago in June 2005, Barack Obama delivered the following address: "As revolutions in technology and communications began breaking down barriers between countries and connecting people all over the world, new jobs and industries that require more skill and knowledge have come to dominate the economy.... These new jobs are not simply about working hard, they're about what you know and how fast you can learn what you don't know. They require innovative thinking, detailed comprehension and superior communication.... Reading is the gateway skill that makes all other learning possible, from complex word problems and the meaning of our history to scientific discovery and technological proficiency. And by the way, it's what's required to make us true citizens."

Any generation's reflexes are largely shaped by media feeds. This has been a 20th century standard; the only difference now is the increased number of media options. For today's youth, TV is the most popular source of both information and entertainment, with 78% of the youth following it loyally. The tendency of young people to turn to the media for entertainment over information is confirmed by the finding that 54% of them watch TV for song-and-dance programmes rather than current affairs. Newspaper reading, admittedly a more serious exercise, is initially a distant second with a 7.5% rating, but gradually picks up as youngsters realise newspapers' potential for turning them into competitive professionals. The important outcome to surface is that the printed word enjoys wider credibility than TV.

However, globally, reading is on the decline, leading to widespread erosion of comprehension skills, even in developed countries. The phenomenal rise of electronic leisure-time aids has made the act of reading a book a highly cumbersome exercise, certainly avoidable if not perceived as bringing immediate gains such as good grades in examinations or prized jobs in the employment market.

NCAER's National Youth Readership Survey (2009) reveals that the higher the level of educational attainment, the greater is the proportional share of readers in different population segments. Of the 100.3 million literate youth having education up to the primary level, only 9% are readers; of the 31.9 million with education up to graduation and above, 53% are readers. Similarly, out of 46.7 million literate youth having education up to the higher secondary stage, 40% are readers, whereas of the 153.7 million having completed matriculation, just 25% take to reading.

Therefore, to extract the maximum advantage from the 'youth bulge', planning must begin in earnest on a number of fronts. First and foremost, if we are talking of building awareness about the necessity of reading books, the primary factor to address is language. Despite globalisation, the mother tongue continues to be the preferred language of young readers. Hindi is the 'first preferred' language for leisure reading for one-third of readers, 87% of whom also consider it their mother tongue. Similarly, 94% of Marathi-readers are Marathi speakers. From the perspective of rural-urban divisions, Hindi and Marathi have interestingly retained their first and second positions as the language of choice in both towns and villages. Bengali secures the third place among rural readers and is sixth in the urban rankings. As for English, it is only in the third place, even among urban dwellers; it does not feature in the top ten for the rural youth.

However, based on the second preferences of 38.6 million young readers, English is at the top spot, with 43.2% of young readers supporting it. This shows Indians' continued attraction of English, especially the youth who aspire to make a mark in life. English has been the most prominent language in international business and science. It is our window to the outside world—considered more progressive and modern—and provides innumerable opportunities for scientific and technological advancements. Over the years, the English language has proved to be one of our principal assets in getting a global audience for Indians' books and films. Unsurprisingly, therefore, an overwhelming 82% of the youth were unequivocal about the role of 'good English' in getting good jobs and 70% even wanted English as the medium of instruction right from primary classes.

Popularising leisure reading in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural country like India is a mammoth responsibility for the State and its stakeholders. Yet, the national objective of creating a secular, progressive, modern and self-reliant society cannot be fulfilled if the minds of our young are not enriched with ideas that contribute to that goal. Ultimately, the culture of reading is broadly linked to the socio-cultural and political commitment of the nation. While the National Literacy Mission has led to the historic adoption of the Right to Education as a Fundamental Right, it would be ideal to see matching commitments to the reading habit—a natural corollary.

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