

ENHANCEMENT OF PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT AND READING SKILLS AS A STRATEGY OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: Arts and Literature are dynamic tools that can help women to improve the political and social participation and to believe in their own capabilities. The various women empowerment programmes have helped women to raise questions about their own agency, their futures and aspirations for individual fulfilment. It has also sparked in them the desire to be self-reliant and empowered. It is widely acknowledged that not merely literary knowledge and skills but also an enhancement of basic reading skills of individuals and a shaping of their reading tastes will bring about women empowerment. It will be fruitful therefore to study a particular instance of the empowerment of a section of low-income urban women of Pune whose reading habits are being nurtured and attempt to estimate and explore to what extent they are empowered.

Keywords: Reading Habits, Empowerment, Low income urban women, knowledge and skills.

Introduction: Statement of the Problem:

Thousands of Indian women living in urban slums have no means of improving themselves and enhancing their sense of self-worth, utilising their potential or achieving self-reliance. They are either illiterate or barely literate. Even were they to possess the ability to read and write, there are few resources and opportunities available to them. As such, their futures remain bleak and even for those who nurture secret dreams and ambitions about self-fulfilment, there is little hope of dreams being realized or ambitions being fulfilled.

Recommendation: As students of English who have actually participated in a programme designed to uplift and empower disadvantaged women in urban slums, we recommend that programmes and activities such as those organized by 'Gyaan Ruchi' be held on a war footing all over India. We recommend that college students should be fruitfully employed in helping out with these programmes. Not only would these students supply an energetic and informed 'workforce' but also they would themselves acquire training while being, at the same time, sensitized to the need of the urban poor.

Supporting Arguments and Evidence: The Gyaan Ruchi project is a part of Gyaan Adab which is one of Pune's premier centres for the enhancement of literature and culture. This project aims at helping less privileged urban women at the Gyaan Ruchi centre to make the best use of their talents and skills in order to adapt themselves to their surroundings and to meet the challenges of the contemporary world. The paper focuses on our own experiences as participants in this project in Pune in order to detail the strategies employed by Gyaan Ruchi and assess the extent to which these strategies for women's empowerment have been effective. Literature and arts are dynamic tools that can help women to improve their political and social participation and to believe in their own capabilities. This project

develops a well-planned comprehensive program which will help these women to raise questions about their own agency, their futures and their aspirations for individual fulfilment. It has also sparked in them the desire to be self-reliant and empowered. It is widely acknowledged that not merely literary knowledge and skills but also an enhancement of the basic reading skills of individuals and a shaping of their reading tastes will bring about women empowerment. The project reaches out to women from economically weaker sections of society and located on the periphery of education opportunities and helps them to transform their lives through a comprehensive program of literature and arts, which incorporates functional literacy and social and economic skills. This will enable them to become more aware of their own potential and forge their own way of negotiating the world of opportunities around them. Various activities conducted during the session include: Book reading and discussion Interactive sessions Multi-medium communication activities Self-expression through writing and forms of art. Ideally the organizers of Gyaan Ruchi aim at encouraging women to reach a point in their own awareness and growth, through literature, whereby they choose to empower themselves through functional literacy. This project was established with the intention of promoting the habit among urban disadvantaged women of reading and using books. In order to do this, the Gyaan Ruchi project began setting up small community-based libraries and stocked them with books, many chosen by the women themselves. The fact that the women choose the books themselves indicates that the books are of interest to them. The concept of the library and using books as tools for change was gradually expanded into a wider self-development approach.

The eleven centres associated with Gyaan Ruchi project are:

The Kishikinda Centre: it is at Kothrod with 30 members in it. These women speak Marathi and work outside as domestic helpers to earn their living. Most of them are married and they are in the age group of 23 to 40 years.

- The Shastrinagar Kothrod Centre: here there are 44 women who work as beauticians, house maids, cooks, for instance. This centre was established two years ago.

- The Sagar Colony Centre: around 30 ladies are participants at this centre and all of them are married.

- The Jaibhavani nagar Centre: this is a new centre with 14 members in it.

- The Shivaginagar Road Centre: it is an aanganvadi. Mrs. Aruna, the supervisor of the centre was the first woman to recommend a library for the centre which has nearly 35 ladies actively taking part in all the sessions conducted

- The Thofkana Centre: this is also aanganvadi and most of the ladies here are Muslims. They get together in a mandir with a keen interest on learning and achieving success in life.

- The Todiwala Centre: This being an aanganvadi, nearly 25 to 30 aanganvadi teachers attend this program

- The Toopernagar Centre: This centre has a mixed group with both married and unmarried women. Various activities are conducted to enhance their reading skills.

- The Mangalwarpet Centre: It is a Muslim colony where the families reside in slums. Despite this, the enthusiasm shown by the supervisor has helped these disadvantaged women to change their slum mentality and aim for higher things in life than they do

- The Deccan Centre: This is a newly- opened centre with 25 women members who participate in the project

- The Yerwada Centre: This was the first centre suggested by the founder member Mrs. Naseema Merchant and has Muslim women as members.

The Gyan Ruchi (G.R.) project is a very interesting project since it organizes wide array of creative activities aimed at enabling women to improve their personalities, sense of self-worth, self-reliance, and general standards of living. Through this project, the less-privileged women who participate in it are given several opportunities to discover their own potential and strengths and utilize them in the best possible way. As the saying goes, "If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation." These women certainly help to transform the lives of their own families by the information and training they receive. They change

from being mere housewives, into being women with the ability being small-scale entrepreneurs with home industries. Above all, they understand and appreciate the importance of education. What exactly do they do? The G.R project has 11 centres in different areas of Pune. Each centre organizes a meeting once a month and the women beneficiaries are taught many things of which they have been hitherto completely unaware. They also perform various activities under the guidance of able leaders. These women voluntarily take part and gain vast array of knowledge through various sessions that are conducted. They have learnt who they are, what are their abilities and strengths and the area of their interest. By making them realize their worth they are instilled with self-confidence to enhance their communication skills and leadership qualities. They realize their talents in a best possible way and become more creative in their thinking which enables them to realize their aim in life and to achieve their goals.

Where do they get together?

The first step in this process is to collect data about each woman willing to be a part of this programme. A date is fixed according to their convenience and accordingly the meeting will be held in a public space such as a community hall, a community centre or an aanganvadi.

Their response: The G.R Project is one of the most useful and praiseworthy projects undertaken by Gyan Adab. The women at the centres have expressed their support and willingness towards the various activities held at their own centres. During one of our visits to the centre we were extremely inspired to learn that the women were eager to grab all the opportunities that were provided to them. This was seen in various activities conducted during the session. In the first activity the women were given a sheet of paper and were asked to write all the things that one should imperatively carry when one travels. Once they made their lists, each one was asked to read aloud what they had written. Thus the women had the opportunity to voice their thoughts. Shows that these women are capable of coming out of the closed doors when given a chance. In the process, these women also received some simple grooming and commonsensical everyday knowledge.

Since these women were also mothers, they also had to take care of their children. In order to overcome this barrier, the organizers took the initiative in keeping the children busy throughout the sessions by conducting activities for them such as drawing, colouring, and working on puzzles, to name a few. In the other activity women were divided into four groups, and they were given creative design sheets and some materials and they were asked to work out



patterns of their own, using their own creative ideas. All were involved and collaborative and they came up with best of their ability and their designs looked wonderful. In the next activity conducted, the women had to advertise the product given to them in a creative manner. They were very innovative in their presentations. Lastly, though they hesitated to participate in anything like dancing, a few of them were bold and enthusiastic enough to show case their talent. The G.R. project has had very positive responses and the women have gained a lot of knowledge and ideas which, in turn, have helped them to transform their lives. Though everything seems to be good about this project it's not an easy task and lot of preparation and patience is required. Hence, we conclude by saying that the positive responses from the women have made the project a highly successful and enriching one. This in turn has made the organizers of the G.R. project realize that their efforts have been more than worth it.

These are the various steps undertaken for the success of the project in educating women:

1. The setting up of small libraries in areas in the city
2. Profiling community members and issuing them 'library membership' cards
3. Introducing interactive sessions around books in the library
4. Introducing the use of art forms to enable the women reflect on themes, formulate their ideas and voice the feelings arising from the reading and sharing that they have done as also enhance their own creativity

5. Introducing articulated communication skills sessions
6. Introducing functional literacy skills
7. Introducing sessions on issue based interaction
8. Using story telling as a mode for problem/ issue discourse
9. Encouraging the exploration of personal aspirations
10. Goal setting (Personal, family, community, social and professional), through various methods of creative visualisation)
11. Leadership training
12. Train the trainer sessions
13. Community and public presentation and programmes.

Conclusion: GYAAN means 'knowledge' and RUCHI means 'taste'. So the Gyaan Ruchi project helps the women of urban and semi-urban areas to widen the array of knowledge through the various opportunities and makes them believe that they are capable of becoming powerful women of the society. As we were part of this project, during our stay at Pune, we got a holistic idea about G.R Though it appears very simple and low cost, the outcome are very impressive. The women bloom in their own society more different than before. They are able to take decisions for themselves have realised the importance of education in life. Hence they desire to help their children to get good education and make them a good citizen. In the beginning when they came to the centres they brought with them emotional and psychological baggage and had many questions which expressed their doubts. Their faces were positively

unhappy. But once they participated in the programme and all its activities, and were provided with the material far beyond their expectations their morale was clearly boosted as was their confidence. The smiles on their faces were proof of this. This project has also shown us how we can help and

encourage the women of our society who are deprived of education and are held back themselves from realising their own worth. For us it was a morally and socially sensitizing experience much more than a mere summer internship.

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