

# **HIDDEN LITERACIES:**

**Ethnographic studies of literacy and  
numeracy practices in Pakistan**

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## Dedication

I dedicate this book to my father, mother  
and David Kahler, my guru.

# **INTRODUCTION**

*Rafat Nabi*

In 2007, I came to the University of East Anglia to work with Professor Alan Rogers and Professor Brian Street. The main purpose was to write a book on Adult Literacy from a practitioner's point of view, in the light of my field experience. I have been in the field of Education and Adult Literacy for twenty years. I always felt some unease with the Adult Literacy Programmes that we were running and was intrigued to find out what the users felt about these programmes, and to solicit suggestions about how the participants thought that the programmes could be improved. I had already discussed my concerns with many people, on different formal and informal levels and with several so-called "experts" in this field. Why have attempts to improve Adult Literacy been considered unsuccessful, particularly in Pakistan and in general in South Asia? Are the traditional, rigid methods of teaching inappropriate? Is it a 'one size fits all' approach? Is it the approach or method of teaching that is wrong or is it something else, hidden from the eyes of policy makers and implementers? I thought that perhaps writing with a practitioner's eyes and drawing policy makers' attention to the evidence could encourage them to think and to make changes. I believed that in the absence of research-based studies, my efforts could play a role in changing attitudes and encouraging more creative solutions to the problem.

I discussed my concerns and dissatisfaction about adult literacy efforts with the two professors who were equally keen to tease out the essential missing ingredients in the current approach. They drew my attention to and encouraged me to explore the hidden world of social literacies and numeracies. They wanted me to find out if these do exist, and see if they could offer light on the path of my discovery journey for the enhancement of adult literacy. . I took their advice on board and in order to get a deeper understanding about social literacies and numeracies, I read numerous books, reports, and also attended a LETTER workshop series in Ethiopia. Not only this, I also made conscious efforts to attend and, when invited, to give presentations at as many seminars as my time permitted. I also attended many Literacy and Development meetings. All these efforts gave me a deeper understanding about social literacies and numeracies, and consequently I felt more and more committed to explore this world.

The understanding I gained from the literature and by attending workshops and seminars resonated with me, as I recalled many occasions when I had met people who called themselves 'illiterate', yet in my presence they had written receipts, filled in forms, written letters, sent text messages, taken phone messages, and read charts and newspapers. At the time, it had not occurred to me to question why they had labelled themselves as 'illiterates' when they could so convincingly demonstrate that they had acquired some literacy skills.

I decided to explore this dark world of the so-called 'illiterates' world of literacy' using ethnographic approaches. Fortunately, on this discovery journey, Brian Street and Alan Rogers were holding my hand. I quickly found out that these kinds of 'illiterates' are all around me, they are performing a wide variety of tasks, involving many kinds of literacy practice, but their learning efforts were largely hidden. I had chosen unintentionally not to appreciate their engagement in literacy events and practices. Perhaps they regard me as a member of the group who destroy their feelings, emotions and self-respect by labelling them as 'illiterate' and who reinforce their belief in this fallacy.

When I started my field research using ethnographic approaches, a whole taboo was broken. People functioning well in society using literacy practices on-the-job, at home, in religious places, in trades and in the community had nevertheless been labelled 'illiterate' and had come to believe this themselves. They had made themselves functionally literate by learning from people and from the environment, without attending any formal literacy programmes. Indeed, some had tried the latter with rather negative outcomes. What I discovered in their experiences of learning, theories of learning and patterns of learning are lamplighters for all who are involved in conceiving, developing and implementing literacy programmes.

This book is an effort to reveal this hidden social literacy world, to learn from them and make an effort to pass on their insights to policy makers, implementers, donors and everyone in the field of the promotion of adult literacy. There are lessons to be learned from these motivated, often self-styled 'illiterates' and if applied, perhaps future literacy efforts may have the opportunity to achieve higher success rates than those at present.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would never have been able to start my journey to discover this hidden world without the support of World Education, Boston, USA to fulfil one of my dreams, which is in your hands. I would also like to thank the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) in the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK for accepting me as a visiting fellow and providing me not only with all the necessary administrative and educational support but also with a platform for intellectual grooming. True thanks to Libby and Dawn for all their help.

My acknowledgements would not be complete if I do not give thanks to all the people who wholeheartedly and openly shared their experiences with me and started a fire in my thoughts and beliefs. They were movers-and-shakers and brought a revolutionary change to my perspective of the world of literacy and illiteracy. Special thanks to all those friends who made my stay comfortable in the UK.

For David Kahler, vice president of World Education, I feel the limitations in my vocabulary to pay true tribute to my guru and mentor who was with me in every difficult moment throughout my literacy career and backed every innovative strategy which I had developed and implemented. Thank you, David, for holding a lamp for me on the dark road of my journey for the promotion of adult literacy.



## **FOREWORD**

*Alan Rogers and Brian V Street*

Among the many contributions which this book makes to contemporary debates about the nature of literacy and numeracy and the best ways to promote them, it seems to us that three stand out.

First, through a series of seven case studies, Dr Nabi shows conclusively that there are a significant number of persons who are labelled 'illiterate' and indeed who call themselves 'illiterate' but who (sometimes unconsciously) use some forms of literacy and numeracy in their daily lives. An illiterate domestic servant 'reads' when preparing breakfast and 'writes' when taking a message over the telephone or making a note about laundry given to the cleaner. An illiterate street beggar keeps a record of the money she acquires and the loans she makes. Shop keepers and self-employed workers have their own informal literacy and numeracy practices. To these people, what they are doing does not count as 'literacy'; only the kind of literacy which is taught in schools or in adult literacy learning programmes is 'real literacy' – and they have not been to school or adult literacy class. So they still think of themselves as 'illiterate'. The findings here show that the distinction between 'literate' and 'illiterate' is uncertain – with all that this implies for the statistics on which adult education policies are built.

Secondly, some of the case studies reveal how some people come to learn literacy and numeracy skills. Drawing on the assistance of friends and neighbours, collecting their own learning 'materials', a plumber set himself ten steps, a vegetable seller drew up a plan of six stages. Their approach was largely 'whole word recognition' rather than phonics. This has much to tell us about the need for different ways of helping adults to learn literacy and numeracy.

And thirdly, the book sets out clearly the reasons for using the ethnographic research approaches of Dr Nabi and the methodologies she employed. It is a useful guide to others who wish to find out the 'hidden literacies' in their own context, and how to draw lessons from what they find. We do not claim that those who explore the everyday literacy and numeracy practices in their own context will find the same as Dr Nabi found; but we are certain that they will find out much which will teach them how people engage with and learn about literacy and numeracy and

what they feel about literacy and numeracy, and these findings can form a foundation on which to build new and more effective adult learning programmes. It has always been stimulating and enjoyable working with Dr Nabi on this project.

## **PART I:**

### ***AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN PAKISTAN***

*Alan Rogers and Brian Street*

We present here a collection of seven case studies of literacy and numeracy in Pakistan drawn up by Rafat Nabi using ethnographic approaches.

We need first to look at how they were collected and why this approach was adopted; and then after the case studies, to look at what we ourselves have learned from them about literacy and numeracy in this particular context and what their implications are for our adult literacy and numeracy learning programmes.

#### **First, what do we mean here by ethnography?**

Ethnography involves looking at and listening to other people to see what they have to tell us; “writing a culture”, as Hall (2006; see Clifford 1986) puts it.

We do need to make it clear that what we have here is not a full ethnography; that would have taken a very long time, probably some years, and called for an extended report. These studies are based on *ethnographic-style* research (Green and Bloome 1997), adopting the approaches and tools of ethnography, looking at literacy and numeracy through the eyes of other people, how they perceive and engage in literacy and numeracy practices in their daily lives. We admit that in concentrating on literacy and numeracy, we are perhaps making these activities rather more important than they are to the persons being described; but at least we are not making assumptions about so-called ‘illiterates’ – that they have no experience of literacy and numeracy and therefore cannot contribute to determining their own learning programmes (Street 1984; for similar studies in literacy, see Prinsloo and Breier 1996 (South Africa); Kalman 1999 (Mexico); Nirantar 2007 (India)).

This kind of ethnographic perspective takes a small subject - one incident or activity, or one person or small group, in short, a case - and, within the overall theme of the research (in this instance, adult literacy and numeracy) looks at it/him/her/them in

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great detail. It creates what is sometimes called "a thick description" (Geertz 1973; see Geertz 1988). Almost all the case studies here deal with one particular person – a domestic servant, a beggar, a cloth dyer, a vegetable seller, a plumber – but in two cases a small group is examined, in one case a family unit of three women, in another case a shop owner and his staff engaged in selling bangles. The research consists of Rafat, the author, 'meeting' these people face to face over an extended period; listening to them, taking in what they do as well as what they say.

It is different in this respect from other forms of research which structure the research in advance, determine the questions, seek out a wide enough 'sample' to be interviewed to feel safe in drawing general conclusions, and concentrate on what is important to the researcher. Instead, it simply takes a case and asks, 'what does this case teach me?', 'what is it a case of?' Of course, the author has her own interests, as do we as the compilers of this book, so it is not entirely true to say there is no structure in advance. Rafat has a long history of working with NGOs and government agencies concerned with literacy in Pakistan and she has developed programmes there, some of which are challenged by what she learned from these case studies. Although she had some very general questions in her mind, she did not formulate these in any detail, and in most cases she held back and let her respondents first express their feelings and anxieties. She listened to and respected deeply what they had to say. She also tried to be sensitive to local cultural styles and meanings, so she did not push questions onto people; rather she waited until they felt more comfortable with her, recognised some affinity, for example, some past event or relatives or places in common, or some area where she had lived, studied or worked, and only then did she develop the questions she was burning to ask. It was their words first, then hers. This we believe gives the account greater veracity and credibility. In ethnographic terms, the 'reflexivity' displayed by the author enables the reader to 'see' the larger picture and to make up their own mind about the validity and wider significance of the material. Here 'sampling' is not necessary, nor is 'objectivity' or 'the fly on the wall' approach previously advocated for such observations. Rafat participated fully in the conversation, and her open recognition of her own involvement is itself a significant part of the stories and speaks aptly to their wider implications, on which we will comment below (see below Part III).

And this implies a different set of relationships between the researcher and the researched (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Tacchi et al 2003). In traditional research, power lies with the researcher; he/she chooses what to discuss and brings the conversation back to that topic when it 'strays'. The researcher decides what to rule in and what to rule out, what to use and what to discard. In ethnographic-style research, power is more evenly shared: the researched are encouraged to take control of the discussion, to talk about what is important to them rather than only about what is important to the researcher. Power still remains with the researcher and is often acknowledged, but, as Rafat says, more in the way of 'respect' than of assertiveness. Such relations are acknowledged in contemporary ethnographic research and addressed through the researcher adopting a 'reflexive' stance, as can be seen in her commentaries throughout the case studies (Cohen et al 2000: 141).

Power will of course extend so far as to the choice of whom to research. The case studies are not always chosen by the researcher in advance, although they can be (see Yin 1994; Yin 1989; Dyson and Genishi 2005). In the case of these seven interviews, all of them except one 'simply arose' from what caught the eye of the researcher. A domestic servant in a house in which Rafat was staying led to her mother, a street beggar. A visit to a literacy centre resulted in a chance meeting with a former student there, and another such visit resulted in a small family group seeking her out for a meeting. A vegetable seller called at the house; a disastrous flooding at home led her to interview the plumber. All of these were singular opportunities which were seized as a chance to learn something about other people's practices and beliefs, sets of values and experiences; things were followed up as they led from one thing to another. Only in one case, the bangle seller, did the researcher deliberately set out to examine the literacy and numeracy practices of a particular commercial economic activity.

The case studies then are not chosen because of some characteristic within them. They are not 'typical' case studies, although we believe that these seven case studies do indicate that a large number of other people have been misclassified as 'illiterate' on the basis of inadequate understanding of their ways of life and of what is meant by 'literacy'. They are not chosen because they are instances of 'good practice'. They have not been selected because they prove some point. They are presented here

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because they are indicative, 'telling case studies' (Mitchell 1984) – they each have some lesson which it is valuable for us to learn.

And in this sense, such ethnographic case studies challenge our existing assumptions. Through case studies, we find out when our general conclusions are not true. To give an example, we assume so much about beggars in the streets of cities like Karachi; but to read the story of Rana challenges everything we think we know about beggars. And even if these case studies do not lead us to any great new conclusions, at the least they teach us not to make wide sweeping unfounded generalisations about those we are seeking to help. Through ethnography we not only learn about others; we also learn about ourselves. Ethnography challenges the researcher as well as the researched, the teacher as well as the taught. What am I doing? Is this the right thing to do? Is this the right way to be doing it? Can I get evidence for my statements? What assumptions am I making and is there real evidence for them? Ethnography challenges us not to make generalisations or to develop practices for learning and teaching without having some evidence on which to base them.

And in ethnographic research, the information we collect is not restricted to what might be called 'hard data' – facts and figures, dates and activities, numbers of persons participating and succeeding, etc. It extends to feelings, to attitudes, to perceptions. We want to know what it feels like to be someone else, so far as we can; we want to know what their attitudes are towards the subject under discussion (in this case, literacy and numeracy: it is interesting that these respondents seem to be able to identify 'literacy', have a very clear picture of what it is and what it is not, and feel that they lack it, but they can less easily identify 'numeracy' and see themselves as deficient in the ability to use numbers). Perceptions are a key element in the data being collected.

Which makes this kind of research sound very complicated. But the aim is simple: to learn as much as possible about the other person. Ethnography is about understanding the subject being discussed (mainly, though not solely in this instance, literacy and numeracy) *through the eyes of someone else* (Heath and Street 2008; see also Papen 2005; Hamilton 2005). What do literacy and numeracy look like through the eyes of a street beggar, an unschooled plumber, a shop keeper? In this sense, it is turning the world upside down; it is entering a new world, making the familiar strange. A story which has been used on several

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occasions to illustrate the approach of the ethnographer is that of the fish and the turtle. A turtle went for a walk on land one day, and on his return to the sea, tried to tell the fish all about it. But it was hard for the fish to envisage a world where people walked but did not swim, where they breathed air rather than lived in water (see Gebre et al 2009). The gap between the lifeworld of the researcher (Bourdieu's *habitus*) and the lifeworld of the researched is often very great and the language to be used to describe it may be difficult to find.

But such a story may mislead as much as it helps. For ethnography is not to be applied solely to the strange, the unusual, the different. It also applies to the world which we ourselves live in; the turtle can apply its ethnographic lens to the world of the fish as well as the world above the water. Ethnography is opening up ourselves to the inspection of other people; it is viewing others **and** viewing ourselves in the light of others. It is like looking at the world through the large end of the telescope. It highlights things we have taken for granted for many years; it 'makes the familiar strange' so that we can examine it from a different perspective, look at it in a new way. We can apply the ethnographic lens to everything we are doing, including ethnography (even writing this book together) (Nirantar 2007).

Ethnography then is about adopting a different point of view. It is not deciding what the researcher thinks is important, and then asking the researched about that topic, because we cannot know in advance what is important to the other person or group. In several of these case studies, Rafat found herself discussing and learning about things which were not on her literacy and numeracy agenda. With the bangle seller, for example, she discovered a new language altogether, with the dyer, a whole new world of colours; she came to see fruit and vegetable selling from a different perspective. She thought about things she had never thought of before.

So in ethnography, it is important not to decide in advance what we are looking for too precisely, because we do not know what is important to our subject, although as we indicated above we do also need to recognise our own interests that may underpin our participation in the project in the first place. *Reflexivity* provides a framework of thinking that both opens our eyes to the new and the strange, including in our own practices, whilst at the same time atuning us to how our very presence and stance is already, to some extent, 'loaded'. So the field worker tries to bracket such

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framing, as he or she follows local utterances and discourses. Here, one thing leads to another; new doors lead into new rooms to be entered, new windows reveal new gardens to explore. An ethnographer follows where the trail leads. It is possible for the researcher to point in a certain direction, to bring back a wandering conversation, and Rafat shows great skill in doing this. Simple questions such as 'why?', if asked (not too insistently, of course), can help to explain and make meaning of what is being discussed; and it may be needed, for in many cases the subject may never have thought of asking, 'why am I doing this?'.

This does not mean that the researcher is no longer true to his/her own vision, that the agenda has been abandoned. Rafat remains the researcher in every case study; she has simply opened her mind to the possibility that there are more things under heaven than her existing philosophy allowed for. She enters and exits the world of the researched all the time; she gets close and then at times distant, so that she can view the subject through her own lens. Insider and outsider, distance and proximity are key components of the ethnographic perspective; insider-outsider; they correspond to the notions of -emic and -etic that are key concepts in the ethnographic literature (Todorov 1988). They become not an either/or but rather a dialogue, a dynamic relationship between here and there that continues well beyond the particular field site and makes the ethnographer always also a questioner and reflector on what seems 'normal'. Rafat, then, goes back and forth, until she begins to hear the voice of her respondents and see their meanings and values. But she never forgets her mission – to understand the literacy and numeracy practices of men and women who are called 'illiterate' and who call themselves 'illiterate'. But that does not dominate her approach or dictate the boundaries of her explorations – she moves in and out of the scene, so that she is taken into the life of a street beggar and the aspirations of a plumber even as she also reflects on how their local literacy practices and ways of learning might force us to reflect critically on the ways in which agencies and programmes have constructed 'literacy' as an object of pedagogy and assessment.

One lesson which these case studies reveals from the use of ethnographic methodologies is that all such research will alter the situation. By asking her subjects to reflect on what they are doing, Rafat is encouraging them to become more reflexive, to think about things they have taken for granted, to make the

unconscious conscious. The lives of those we meet in such situations will never be the same.

And equally such encounters will also change the researcher. In this process, as the case studies show, Rafat is constantly challenging herself. Saying to herself that 'I used to think that ...' leads to a new understanding of the presuppositions with which Rafat had entered this field and to a re-thinking of all that she had understood before. And out of all of this, she makes her own meanings of what she sees and hears; she interprets it in the light of her own experience and gains new insights. Ethnography takes the views expressed by the subject seriously but not as conclusive; it tries to find out what they mean by what they are saying. The point is to look at the world through the eyes of the people we are studying.

And ethnography is not looking for great sweeping generalities. We will not draw huge conclusions from these studies, although they will challenge some of the generalisations about adult literacy and numeracy on which many adult learning programmes are built. The ethnographic approach looks for the differences in learners' literacy and numeracy practices as well as similarities. It does not see difference as deficit, as "lack of" or "not knowing". It tries to understand, not judge. The ethnographer leaves his/her normative position, does not assume that its position is the best of all possible positions and should be the rule by which all other people must be qualified or disqualified. In ethnography, we seek to understand the fact that others have a different and equally valued way of life. This approach may then be added to a less relativistic position that those working in the field of adult literacy and numeracy may wish to apply – whether functional, critical, Freirean, economic etc; it will enrich the data sources and the framings that these perspectives customarily call upon. Some general principles can be drawn from these case studies, but they will always be held contingently rather than absolutely.

### **Why is an ethnographic approach valuable?**

So that we are far from saying that an ethnographic approach to adult literacy and numeracy is the *only* approach to be adopted. But we do believe – and these case studies demonstrate – that it is a particularly useful tool to challenge the existing paradigms of literacy research. We need to add it to our existing armoury.

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There is one major reason for this. We all argue that, for adult learning in particular, if not for all education and training, it is important to take into account what the learners already know – what they do (their practices) and their perceptions of the world they live in and of themselves within that world, built up over many years from their experiences. All learning (including basic literacy and numeracy) is built on prior learning; it never starts from scratch. There is no illiterate person who comes to an adult literacy class who does not have some ideas about and experience of literacy and of themselves in relation to literacy; and we need to understand those ideas before we can develop effective learning programmes for them.

But – and here is the main point about the ethnographic approach which Rafat has used – there is no point in just asking people about their literacy and numeracy practices, for they almost certainly have never even seen them. Look at Shazia the domestic servant. Rafat notices that when she went into the kitchen to prepare breakfast, she consulted a chart on the wall; if Rafat had asked, 'what are you doing?', Shazia would not have answered 'reading' (she consistently said that she is illiterate); she would have replied that she was 'making breakfast'. Reading was an unconscious and integral part of the activity of making breakfast. Again, Rafat was with Shazia when she answered the phone and wrote down a message; her response this time would have been, 'I am answering the phone', not that 'I am writing'. We all learn all the time – that is one of the main conclusions of these case studies. Most of our learning is unconscious learning, although some is structured, as the vegetable seller and the plumber show. Such informal learning results in "tacit funds of knowledge" and unconscious mental and physical skills which we use all the time but without realising this (Moll et al 1992; see also Eraut 2000; Polanyi 1966; Reber 1993). So asking people directly about their literacy and numeracy practices will be inconclusive. Rather we need to observe what is going on and deduce from this together with the answers given to our questions what our own interpretation is of what we see and hear. Ethnography is the main tool to get to an in-depth understanding of the literacy and numeracy practices of others.

### **The ethnographic tools**

The seven case studies here show some of the methods of ethnography.

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Now, we do wish to stress that using ethnographic methodologies is not a simple matter of taking up a tool box which everyone can use in exactly the same manner. Rather it is a matter of approaches, of attitudes towards the subject and the researched, a way of thinking and of feeling. The researcher does not start by assuming that the researched carry labels round their necks - these respondents are not chosen because they are 'illiterate'. There is a greater equality between the researcher and the researched than in traditional research. While there is still an element of 'extractive research' (collecting data from the researched to be taken away and processed for the benefit of the researcher) even in ethnographic-style research, there is a more conscious element within this approach that the researcher has much to learn from the researched; through reflexivity, the researcher opens him/herself up to challenge, to critique, to change. And there is a commitment that the researched must benefit as directly as possible from the research.

Rafat acknowledges that she entered the field with several basic principles in her mind - principles relating to ethics and power relationships, of gaining access, of language (as discourse) and languages, of selection of case studies etc. Notice how she enters the situation, the respect she shows to the people she is trying to understand; and notice how she builds on this a remarkable set of relationships which enable her to ask questions about intimate and often secret activities (Rana) and obtain information that no direct researcher would be able to get. Time is needed to build up trust and commitment.

But also notice how she retains her own focus while following the often lengthy discussions. She follows things up from small hints, pursuing where the trail leads rather than directing the research into her own channels, coming back to issues which had been raised earlier and then lost when the stream had flowed in a different direction. Notice her patience but also her persistence. When she could not get all the information she wanted from the vegetable seller, rather than hold him up from his selling, she arranged for a second interview at her home. Not understanding all that the bangle seller had to say, she phoned him using skype from the UK to Pakistan to obtain or to check the information he had provided. Checking, cross checking, triangulation are still relevant to the ethnographic researcher, but mainly it is following through hints that there is something further to be explored.

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She is also honest about her own position – who she is, what she started out expecting etc. She sometimes realises that she might be upsetting her respondents, as in the family scene in the hotel. So she pulls back a bit from her own agenda and lets them express the anxieties and indignation they feel about adult literacy classes and teachers – criticisms that indeed touch on her own role as organiser of such classes. Eventually, the participants have had their say and seem to feel a little chastened at being so critical of a respected colleague, and this gives Rafat an entry to raise further questions and to sensitively probe the claims made, often agreeing with them as she recognises the need to go back to the agencies she works with and challenge their assumptions and ways of working. Such direct engagement adds to the credibility and validity of the account, whereas in some more 'objectivist' research paradigms they would detract from it.

Ethnographic research then is not passive research; it requires active encouragement of the participants. It will often meet with resistance, as Rafat discovered on several occasions, both from the subject and from those around who could not understand the purpose of such research. 'Getting too close' is often a charge against the ethnographer; they may be accused of 'naïve acceptance' of what the respondents say.

The data to be collected comes from three main sources. First, there is what is heard, the responses to questions or discussions listened into. It needs to be recorded as quickly as possible. Rafat sometimes used a tape recorder, but at other times, she left the situation from time to time to make notes in a notebook in some private location. Others have been able to record conversations and interviews and even sometimes to videotape activities. But all will end up in some form of field notes of the conversations, what was said (and how it was said). As we can see from the case studies, the conversations were always to some extent guided by the researcher; but for much of the time, it simply flowed, often into channels which seem remote from Rafat's key interests; and Rafat was contented to allow it to continue for a while unguided. But after a time, she skilfully brought it back on track. The ethnographer does not just listen in to the conversations of others (although that will be a major part of their functions); their role is that of promoting discussion, sometimes even controversy - the 'asker of awkward questions'! But these are not the questions of the interrogator, the inspector; these are the questions of a close

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friend and colleague who wishes to understand, questions built up from the experience which she brings to the situation.

And an ethnographer listens carefully to the language being used. We do not just mean what tongue is being spoken, although that is important. Rafat was surprised on several occasions at the way in which the people she spoke with switched from one language to another, from one script to another. But she also listened carefully to the words being spoken, for these reveal so much about the attitudes of the speaker. When she asked Zia the plumber whether he was 'illiterate', he replied that he had not been to school. That was not what Rafat had asked him; but for him, his attitude towards literacy was that it was essentially tied up with schooling. Words indicate thoughts – and an ethnographer is trying to discover what people think and feel as well as what they do and say.

The second main source is that which is seen and experienced. Participant observation is a main method by which the ethnographer joins in the activities of the researched while still continuing to act as detached researcher, assessing and analysing the activities and the relationships of those engaged in them. But this was not open to Rafat; she could not work alongside the domestic servant or beggar, plumber or fruit seller. So her role in these case studies is that of observer as well as listener. She watched while the domestic servant did her work, as the vegetable seller sold to customers, as the bangle shop owner supervised his assistants. And her observations raised further questions which she pursued with her respondents.

The third source – and one often overlooked – are the documents in the case, the artefacts used in the case study activities. The chart on the kitchen wall, the box of different coloured cards, the account books of the bangle shop, the labels on the jars of dyes, the papers which the vegetable seller brought to her are all part of the evidence, for they may at times challenge what the researched are saying. The bangle seller and the incident of the receipt is a very clear example of this: Rafat did not need a receipt but she wanted him to write one to show to her (and indeed to himself) that – although 'illiterate' – he could write adequately for that purpose. It was a created situation for the purposes of the research.

Collections of such texts (if the respondents are willing to part with them) or photographs of such texts are all part of the evidence from which the ethnographer produces his or her case

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study. Rafat has a significant collection of pieces of writing written by people who call themselves and are called by others 'illiterates', proof of the invalidity of such statements in these cases. She has reproduced some of these in the pages of this book. They enable the reader to 'see' what Rafat saw, the note book pages, the uses of local scripts, the lay-out principles used for tabulating sales of fruits, bangles etc. Without these, it is often difficult for the reader to follow the complex linguistic and script issues involved as participants switch, for instance, between Qu'ranic writing in Arabic, Urdu using a similar script and Sindhi using a different script and language. Participants in such contexts become so used to such switching that they barely even notice and do not comment on it as at all significant – yet for outsiders, particularly those from less multilingual or multiscript backgrounds, such practices are indeed marked and call for attention: how do people learn such different ways of communicating, how do they decide which to use, whether languages or, as in the case of the bangle seller, local dialects and specialist registers?

The material compiled (observed or heard) was collected into Rafat's field notes. As we have noticed, in some instances, Rafat did not use a tape recorder although some ethnographic researchers do. And there were occasions when she did not use a notebook while talking to her people. Instead, she slipped away from time to time and made hurried dictated or written notes which she later wrote up into a more discursive report for herself of what was said and done. And she took photos only with the consent of her respondents.

These notes however will never consist solely of a simple report. As the researcher goes along, ideas and questions will occur to the researcher, and these need to be grabbed and put down while they occur or they will be lost. Some ethnographic researchers keep a notebook in two columns – one column for a description of what happened, one column for the ideas (what others have called 'headnotes') as they occur in the mind of the researcher. Some add a third column describing the context or other features of the events being recorded. Others use a single notebook with some device [for example, square brackets] to indicate the change of 'voice' from the respondent to the researcher's own thoughts. But this may make the subsequent task of identifying such ideas harder.

Then came the final stage. Field notes were written up into case studies. Some researchers have a middle stage – typing up the



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So the final stages of her study has come, writing the field notes into narratives (Hymes 1996) – which Rafat says she found more difficult than collecting the information. The voices of the participants are given in detail as is the background context. Gestures are reproduced, worry and happiness are clearly evident in these accounts. Rafat is willing to share her own feelings on paper as she went about her task, to critique her own actions and attitudes. But she is now writing these case studies for people who were not there, for some people who have never been to Pakistan and can therefore not know what the location looks, sounds, and smells like. So she informs at the same time as she describes, explaining local customs. She does not just record the words: she builds up the whole scene, so we get inside the house or the hotel or the shop. Writing the unspoken context is an essential part of ethnographic-style research.

The seven case studies here have been put together, and as a team, we spent some time looking at them to see what each of us can learn from these case studies.

We are quite clear that these are Rafat's case studies. Others interviewing these people would have written somewhat different accounts. And similarly, we are quite clear that our conclusions will be distinctive. When reading these case studies, you will find different things in them which will strike you as new and rich with meaning. But because we all have different conclusions to draw from the case studies does not invalidate them. They cannot just be taken as local, anecdotal, for they tell us something very real: that some people do certain things, think certain thoughts, see themselves in a certain way. We are not making wide-ranging generalisations – that all 'illiterates' have taught themselves some literacy skills and engage in these kinds of literacy practices. But we are saying that **some** so-called illiterates have done this, a finding which other research has demonstrated in other contexts (Rogers and Uddin 2005; Rogers, Hunter and Uddin 2007; Uddin 2005) and which therefore forces us to challenge the assumption that 'illiterates' cannot do this. These cases may counter some generalisations, even though we may not generalise very far from them in their own right. We can legitimately say that the attitudes of those of us who tend to regard all illiterates as inexperienced and ignorant need to be re-examined in the light of these case studies.

We have not chosen these case studies to prove anything – they arose during some other research which Rafat was engaging in.

We see some contradictory findings – the desire for schooling of some of these contrasts with the scorn of others towards education. The motivations we find here are all very different. So the analysis of our ethnographic-style findings will never be to make sweeping conclusions, simply to state that a particular case study tells us a certain fact and this challenges our assumptions and at the same time points us in directions for further research. This is surely part of the evidence we need on which to base policy. Statistics together with our general assumptions will give us a general frame; an ethnographic-style approach to literacy and numeracy can test that framing. That is its chief value.

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## **PART II**

# **CASE STUDIES**

## Case studies

## ***INTRODUCTION TO THE CASE STUDIES***

These case studies are based in the province of Sindh in Pakistan, where I spent my childhood, grew up, and received my education from primary to University level. I started my career in the Aga Khan Education Service as a principal in Karachi and later on worked at senior positions in the Aga Khan Education Service and the Education Sector Research Assistance Program (ESRA/USAID). During my career, I have worked in different parts of Pakistan from the coastal areas to the Karakoram mountain range. I have travelled in some very isolated and remote areas for the promotion of education, particularly female education and community development.

Working with females, particularly in remote areas, I noticed on a number of occasions that those who did not get an opportunity to participate in formal education in schools have developed their own learning patterns through which they learned basic literacy skills. They can read and write but still people call them illiterate and they believe that they are illiterate. This perception has a negative effect on their whole thinking and behaviour patterns. As my contact with these people increased, I developed an interest in unpacking the notions of 'illiterate' and 'literate' in the context of Pakistan in more depth. I decided to take a two year break from the job in order to do some research to satisfy my deep thirst. I should pay some tribute to those who helped me to develop a deeper understanding of the field of literacy.

I decided to work with Professor Alan Rogers and Professor Brian Street because their in-depth work was supporting my principal interest and research agendas.

During this period, I went back to Sindh and worked in the field with two agendas. First, to conduct a study of the impact of the Literacy Resource Centers which had been initiated in the villages with the support of ESRA/USAID. Secondly, I decided that if I could not go into the field because of the political situation, then I would collect some case studies of social literacies and numeracies locally. However, once in Sindh, somehow my second agenda became dominant when I realised that around me there were so many sparkling examples just crying out for attention and with a strong suggestion that they could offer me a profound learning experience. These are people who have been given the title of 'illiterate' by people who consider themselves 'literate and

## **Case studies**

educated' solely on the basis of the formal schooling which they have received. In addition, these people have come to call themselves 'illiterate' even though they have often developed their own systems of learning, reading and writing. They manage their jobs in a satisfactory manner, in fact often to a better standard than some of those who attended formal schooling. Then I questioned the policy makers, literacy implementers and promoters as to why these experiences are not taken into account when making policies and developing adult literacy programmes. The history of adult literacy in Pakistan presents a very dismal picture. It is time to experiment with something different in the field of promoting literacy, based on the learning from social literacies.

While collecting case studies from the field, there are a few points that I had to keep in mind. I used a few rule-of-thumb principles such as issues of ethics, power relationships, gaining access, language or languages, selection of case studies etc for conducting my ethnographic research into patterns of social literacies and numeracies. I also encountered quite a few challenges.

### **Ethics**

I used overt methods for conducting research and informed my participants about the purpose of my study. I got permission from the participants to use his or her example in my study. Although I did this in every case study, I am not sure how much they understood about the research but all of them got the sense that I will write their story in my book. I also promised them that their names and identities will be changed so that nobody will recognise them. The purpose is to learn from them without putting them in a difficult position, so wherever necessary the identity has been obfuscated.

### **Power relationship**

The conversations were intended to be on a power-free basis, with all input deemed to be equal. However, in spite of my efforts, I felt that a hidden power relation did exist, particularly in the cases of Razia and Karima. I felt that this power relation was more in a sense of respect rather than one where information was hidden. Such relations are acknowledged in much contemporary ethnographic research and can be addressed through the

researcher adopting a 'reflexive' stance, as can be seen in my commentaries throughout the case studies.

### **Gaining access**

I did not feel at any stage while talking to people that I needed to ask formally for permission for access. All these case studies started with informal conversation and developed naturally. Even so, I asked their permission, which was always given wholeheartedly. This happened in a very informal way and the need to get formal access was never felt to be necessary.

### **Attached and detached**

I found during the observation that I changed roles. Sometimes I was seen by participants as a high caste woman with whom they would not usually talk in this way; on other occasions I was seen as a practitioner or an official working in the field, while at others I was just a customer in a shop. As I indicate, each of these positions affected the respondents in different ways.

### **Language or languages**

Sindhi is the common language of the region of these field stories; Urdu is the national language. The language of instruction in this region is varied between Urdu and Sindhi with some English medium, and with religious education in Arabic. Most texts in the streets of the larger towns are in Urdu and English but in the smaller towns and the more rural areas, they are in Urdu and Sindhi.

Urdu is my mother tongue. All my informants can speak Urdu very well. Most of the conversations took place in Urdu but all my informants were able to use two or more local languages. I cannot speak the local languages fluently, but I can understand Sindhi very well, so I did not feel any problem in terms of language. Likewise, in terms of written scripts, I can read Arabic, and usually Sindhi uses this script (Urdu uses a form of Farsi script).

### **Selection of case studies**

Before going into the field, I had chosen only one case study, that is the glass bangle seller story. The rest of the examples were not chosen before going into the field. However, these stories came so strongly and naturally into my way that I could not avoid them. I saw something worth while when I was talking to them and decided to write about them.

## Case studies

### **Doing 'an Ethnography' versus adopting an ethnographic perspective**

I see these case studies as ethnographic research - perhaps not a full ethnography but certainly using an ethnographic approach. I grew up in these areas. I worked almost twenty years in these areas. During my career, I travelled unlimited times in the remote areas, so I know them very well and they know me very well. I was not a stranger at all. However, I consider myself as both insider and outsider. I worked there but do not live in remote areas. I am not one of them, yet I am one of them. This corresponds to the notions of proximity and distance and of *-emic* and *-etic* that are key concepts in the ethnographic literature (see above).

### **Data collection**

I used several methods of data collection, like scratch notes, drawings, symbols, audio and video recording, collection of handwritten samples and items, photographs etc. All these were very helpful to help understand the participants' point of view and to validate what they are saying from other sources.

### **Observation**

I used observation as the main technique, supported by chatting sessions to clarify many observations. During observation, I was not just looking and taking notes; I made conscious efforts to use all my senses to enrich my observation whenever this was needed. 'Why' and 'How' were very important factors during my observation. I was constantly rechecking whether what I was observing and understanding was the act that she or he was actually performing.

### **Roles**

During my data collection, I felt that I was moving from one role to another role. Sometimes I felt that I had adopted the role of complete participant, then another time I adopted the role of participant as observer. Other times I adopted the role of observer as participant, then another time I became a complete observer. If I consider myself on the continuum of involvement to detachment, then I see myself most often between the role of participant as observer and observer as participant.



## **Case studies**

### **Thick notes**

I used the technique of taking thick notes. I noted down many observations, relevant or irrelevant. I noted down their words, actions, verbal and non-verbal behaviour, facial expressions, and every minute detail of their behaviour patterns.

### **Notes taken**

So that I will not miss any point, I took a break of from three to 15 minutes during the observations. I went into a corner or unnoticed place to record my observations and conversations. If I felt that some point was not clear, I checked it with them immediately. For example, when I was talking to Amen the vegetable seller, I went to arrange tea for him and got a slot of 6 to 10 minutes to check the tape recorder which I used whilst I was talking to him. Similarly with Farida after serving tea, I excused myself, went to the washroom for ten minutes, and recorded what had been said. A tape recorder and camera became an essential part of my life during this study.

### **Voice of observer**

I decided that I would include participants' voices as much as possible. I would also use my voice but mainly for clarification.

### **Analysis of data**

When transcribing notes, I encountered many problems. The most important one was a language problem. When translating from Urdu to English, I often felt the problem that the true feelings and emotions were lost somewhere in the process of translation. I tried to get these as close as possible, but particularly in translating the bangle seller story, I found it a real challenge to translate into English.

Initially when I changed their real names to hide their identities, the whole scene vanished from my mind. Even though I had all the notes, the real scene which was in my imagination and helping me to analyse the data had disappeared. Therefore, I decided to write using their original names while writing and only at the last stage to hide their identity.

In writing a case study, I used all kinds of field notes which I had collected to help me to triangulate the events and increase the validity of the final submission.

### Telling stories

All these case studies are in the form of “telling stories.” They are written as they came through, using the participants’ voices, and some effort has been made to understand their point of view.

When all the case studies were finalised, I realised that this is extremely useful information for everyone who is interested in the promotion of literacy. These findings should be taken into account when trying to find something different for a literacy programme which is to stand any chance of success.

### Salutations

In the culture of Pakistan, people will not speak to their elders without adding some title of respect. When talking, many salutations can be observed by which people communicate respect for one another. The titles chosen will depend on relative age and status in the society. In these case studies, the following titles are used:

*Baji* and *Apa*: means ‘Sister’. An elder sister is usually called ‘*Baji*’ or ‘*Apa*’ (there are other alternatives, for example ‘*Api*’ is also commonly used) rather than addressing her by her first name. *Baji* or *Apa* can also be used for any woman or girl who is older than the speaker. (e.g. salesmen usually call a female customer ‘*Baji*’, ‘*Apa*’, ‘*Khala*’, or ‘*Amma*’ depending on her age).

*Nani*: means ‘Grandmother’. ‘*Nani*’ is also used for a more senior woman to the speaker.

*Khala*: means ‘Aunty’. ‘*Khala*’ is also used by young people to address a middle-aged lady.

*Amma*: means ‘Mother’. ‘*Amma*’ is also used for a female of one’s mother’s age.

*Baity*: means ‘Daughter’. ‘*Baity*’ is also used by an older person for a young girl.

*Baba*: means ‘Father’. ‘*Baba*’ is also used for an older man.

*Begum Sahiba*: means ‘Madam’. The title is used for a women of higher social standing.

### Reluctance

On many occasions, I felt that people were reluctant to give me a receipt, particularly the shopkeepers. When I promised that their identity would be hidden, they said that they would trust me and agreed to give me a receipt but normally it is against their business code of conduct.

## Case studies

### **Anonymous**

In most of the case studies, people were concerned that they might face some difficulty if they could be identified in a book either by description or by a picture. They did not want to disclose their identity for many reasons, including culture, traditions, business. The beggar in particular was concerned about her security. I promised all of them that their names and places would be changed in the book. Therefore, to keep my promise and to give more comfort to all those who wholeheartedly shared their experiences with me, their real names have been changed in the case studies except in those cases where permission was given to continue to use their real names.

*See Shirley Brice Heath and Brian V Street with Molly Mills, 2008 On Ethnography: approaches to language and literacy research, New York: Teachers College Press.*

## ***IS SHAZIA AN ILLITERATE? UNNOTICED POWERFUL LITERACIES IN A DOMESTIC SERVANT'S LIFE***

My niece Rida invited me to visit her home in Gulsion Iqbal (an area of Karachi where predominantly middle and upper middle class people live). My visit lasted three days from 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> November 2007. The housemaid, Shazia, attracted my attention and I started to observe her activities. Shazia was 18 years old, very active, slim, good looking, and a bright girl. She had been attached to Rida's family since she was five years old and used to come with her mother Rana and play with Aleena, Rida's daughter, who is the same age. When Rana left the job in Rida's house about one year ago, Shazia took the job and now she is the full-time maid in the house.

I have known her since her childhood, and together with Rida encouraged Rana to enrol her daughter in a school. We offered to bear all the educational expenses, but she refused, saying "Over my dead body will she go to school". So Shazia was not able to go to school, but she did spend time playing with Aleena, who since her childhood had always shared her toys and storybooks with her. Aleena read stories for Shazia when she was little, and brought story books from the school library for her and together they pored over the pictures in the books. When Aleena was a child, she was not aware of the status of Shazia; for Aleena, she is simply her friend. Rida did not stop Aleena from playing with Shazia unlike most of the families in Pakistan where children are not allowed to play with their servants. Shazia was almost regarded as one of the family, she was so close to Rida's family.

On this visit when I went to spend time with Shazia, I found out that her mother Rana had left this job and got another job. I always appreciated Shazia's desire to learn. When Aleena, aged nine, returned home from school, she became Shazia's teacher and she taught her whatever she had learned in school. By this means, Shazia was able to read a few words. When Shazia was 8 years old, Rana sent her daughter to her sister's village, saying she was worried that if Shazia stayed near this family, then she could become spoiled, learn reading and writing, and start writing letters to boys. She said, "I do not want this to happen. Education is not for poor people. We cannot follow rich people".

## Domestic servant

During the visit, when I saw that Shazia had taken over her mother's job (Shazia had returned to her mother's home after living for nine years at her auntie's home in a remote village in the Punjab), I decided to spend one day with Shazia and observe her activities. This upset Rida, as she thought that I was bringing the office to the home, rather than spending quality time with the family.

Shazia came early in the morning about 7 o'clock, greeting Rida and me; the rest of the family members were still in their rooms. Shazia was wearing a neat dress, which Rida had given her. She went into the kitchen, and started staring at the wall. I also went there to see what she was studying. On the wall was a weekly chart where every family member's preference for breakfast had been written down. The chart looked as below.

Names	Mo	Tu	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sa	Sun
Nani	P+E +T+Or	P+Q +T	B+B+ +J+T	Pu +Po +T	P+Cr +T	P+Po +T	Special Brunch
Yasir	C+M+B +Bu+J +Co	C+M+B +E+Co +Ju	C+M+B +Bu+E +Co+F	Pu+Po+ Co+F	P+O+ Co+Ju	P+O+ Co+F	
Nida	P+E+T +F	P+E+T +F	B+Bu+J +C+M+ T	Pu+PO+ T+F	P+Po+F +T	P+L+ T+F	
Samad	C+M+B +E+Co +F	C+M+B +Bu+J+ F+Co	C+M+P +O+Co +F	Pu+Po+ Co+F	C+M+P +O+Co +Ju	P+Q+ C+ M+Co +F	
Sameer	C+M+B +E+Co +F	C+M+B +E+Co	C+M+P +E+Co +F	Pu=Po+ Co+F	C+M+P +PPo+C o+F	P+Q+ Co+F	
Sunny	C+M+B +E+Co +F	C+M+B +Bu+J+ F+Co	C+M+P +O+Co +F	Pu+Po+ Co+F	C+M+P +Po+Co +Ju	P+Q+ Co+C +M+F	
Bina	C+M +P+Or +T+F	B+Bu+J +M+T+ F	B+Bu+J +M+C+ Or+T	C+M+P u+Po+C o+Ju	P+Po+ M+C+C o+F	P+L+ +C+ M+T	
Guest					P+Po+T +F		

The following key is given so that the reader can appreciate the range of items which can constitute breakfast. P=Paratha (fried thick roti or Nan), E=Egg, T=Tea, Or=Orange juice, Pu=Puri (a kind of fried thin and small roti), Po=Potato curry, Cr= Cream, Ju=Juice, C=Cereal, M=Milk,

## Domestic servant

Co=Coffee, F= Fruits, B=Bread, J=Jam, Bu=Butter, O=Omelette, Q=Qeema (mince), L=Liver.

Shazia can interpret the chart without any difficulty; she recognises the letters and abbreviations, as she has dealt with the chart since she was little. When she was small and did not realise her status, she herself made certain marks or copied what Rida had written.

Shazia washed her hands and spoke out loudly 'Bismillah' (a Quranic phrase that means "In the name of Allah, who is merciful and beneficent"). She started making breakfast for seven family members (Nadia, her husband, three sons and one daughter Aleena and her mother-in-law who is called Nani) plus me (named in the list as 'Guest'). She made eight parathas (fried nan), one for everyone, two omelettes, and potato curry for the rest of the family. She did not measure anything. She used multiple fingers to add several pinches of salt at once to the flour. She took eight handfuls of flour, one for each person to make the parathas and she used an ordinary drinking glass to measure the water for the flour. To make the dough for the paratha, she added water little by little and recited Hamad (phrases in praise of God) for her own satisfaction. To make potato curry, she used seven potatoes and used her finger pinches for adding salt, red chilli powder and other spices. She took three small green chillies, a half chilli for each person. She put a pan on the stove and estimated the amount of oil required. Then she put in a three-finger' pinch of cumin seeds and three whole red chillies. Once the chillies and cumin seed were fried, she added cubes of potatoes and took a little salt in the palm of her hand. Before putting them in the pan, she sniffed the salt. I asked her why she did this, and she said "Baji<sup>1</sup> [sister], in this way salt will not be in excess. My mother told me this", and she added that her mother taught her this *totika* (a kind of superstition which is transferred from generation to generation and becomes a very strong common belief). "You use this *totika* and you do not need to worry that there will be excess salt in the food". Then she added red chilli powder by estimation and when I measured it, the red chilli powder filled three teaspoons. She poured a little water in the pan to tenderise the potatoes and left the pan on a low heat until the potatoes were cooked. Then she

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<sup>1</sup> For meaning of Urdu words in the text, see above pages 32-33

## Domestic servant

took one glass (1/4 pint) of water per person to make tea and coffee.

Once the breakfast was ready and the table was almost set, she rang the bell, to indicate that breakfast was ready (this is a tradition of this particular house). All the family members came to the table and had their breakfast. Sameer and Nasir were reading the newspaper and discussing some important news. The rest of the family was listening and from time to time, they all took part in a discussion of the news. When they started talking about a popular film, Shazia who was serving tea became very excited and said, *"This is a good film and I am going to watch this film tomorrow"*. I must admit breakfast was very delicious.

After having breakfast, all the members of the family went to school, college or their office. Then Shazia took her own breakfast, which consisted of bread, butter, jam, egg and tea. When I asked, "Why did you not have paratha and potato curry?" she said, *"In my whole life, I eat only paratha and tea, so bread and butter is a luxury for me. Therefore, I eat bread and butter and I love it"*. Then she washed the dishes, cleaned the house and took care of Nani. All the time the kitchen TV was on and she was watching the TV whilst doing her work in the kitchen.

She changed Nani's bed and gave her a head and body massage. For the body massage, she went into Rida's bathroom and brought some massage oil from the bathroom cupboards. I asked her, "There were so many bottles, how do you know that you are getting the right bottle?" She said, *"I recognise the size and colour of the bottle and I recognise the picture of the girl, which is on the bottle"*. Then she went into the bathroom of Nani. My niece has five bedrooms, each with an attached bathroom, which is common in Pakistan. Shazia put three kinds of powdered herbs in the bathing tub. She took one bottle cap full of each herb and put it in the bathtub and then she helped Nani to take a bath.

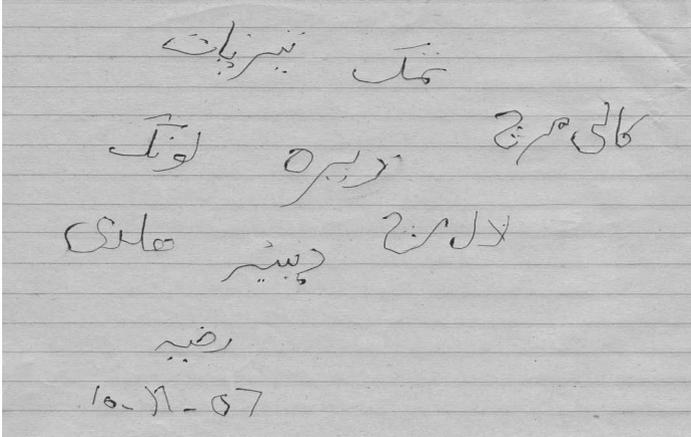
Next, she started preparations for lunch. She cooked rice, minced curry and dal for lunch together with salad and chutney for the children who come back from school and college. By 1.30pm, everyone was back, so Shazia served lunch and afterwards cleaned the table before taking her own lunch. The head of the family allowed her to eat whatever she wants with no restriction and she is treated as a family member. She offered her Zohar prayer and read a few pages of the Holy Quran. (She can read the Quran in Arabic, which she learned in her childhood with Aleena. When the teacher came to teach the Quran to Aleena, she also taught

Shazia; at the request of Shazia's mother, Rida allowed Shazia to learn to read the Quran in Arabic with Aleena). Then Shazia took the daily newspaper and magazine and laid down for one hour's rest. She is not formally educated; she has never been in a school. However, she is fond of looking at the newspaper every day. I asked her "Can you read?" She said, "No, not at all". Then I asked her, "What are you are looking at in the newspaper?" She said, "I look at the pictures and I can now recognise the names of the film stars, TV stars and big political leaders like President Pervaiz, Benazeer Bhutto etc. I like to look at the picture and can tell you what the caption is". I asked her, "How can you do that?" She said, "I watch the news regularly and when, next day, I look at the newspaper, I can guess what is going on in the picture". Suddenly the phone bell started ringing and she quickly rushed over to pick up the phone. She received the call and said, "Nani is resting; when she wakes up, I will give her your message". Then she wrote in Urdu, "Naseen Khala [auntie] phone to Nani, call back before 8 pm." (She wrote only words, not a complete sentence, but the message was clear. There were spelling mistakes). I watched her writing the message on the sheet of paper and when I requested her to show me what she had written, she did so, but with some hesitation. She said that she can read and recognise the names of all the spices and she learned them by studying the labels on the spice bottles. Then I asked her, "Can you write a few names of spices on the paper?" which she did without undue effort. She wrote down, 'black pepper, salt, bay leaf, cumin seed, clove, red chilly, turmeric, coriander', then her name and signature. She said she could also write down the names of family members and close relatives. She said, "Aleena gives me pen, pencil and writing pad, and she taught me how to write the names of spices, food and relatives. She helped me when I was little and she became my teacher and I learned many words from her".

After taking a rest and reading the magazine and newspaper, she offered her Asar prayer. After that, she made tea with samosas and called everybody for tea by ringing the bell. She offered tea to Nani and me, and then took Nani's and her own tea to Nani's room. Nani started talking to her about what was going on in the city, particularly with regard to politics. She read aloud some statements from the newspaper and then they started discussing the news. Shazia became excited and she started taking an active part in Nani's discussion in favour of President Musharraf and Baynazeer. Nani did not like this, as she was a left

## Domestic servant

wing supporter. In the end, Nani said, "Go and do your work". Shazia said "Ok, I am going, but, Nani, please solve my mother's problem". She started begging Nani, held her knees, and said, "Nani, please get permission from my mother, so I can stay in your house twenty-four hours a day. I do not want to go home, otherwise my mother will force me to become a street beggar. I



At my request, Shazia has written down the names of spices in front of me. The hand writing which she learned from family members on the job particularly from Rida and Aleena is very clear and readable.

would rather die than become a beggar". She started crying and said, "For God's sake, save me from my mother". Nani comforted her, saying, "I will talk to your mother and if she will not agree, then I will talk to my son (Rida's husband) and involve a counsellor to solve your problem, if necessary". Shazia kept repeating, "Please, I do not want to beg on the street. I will serve you for my whole life but I will not beg." When Shazia left, I asked Nani "Why is she afraid of her mother?" Nani said, "She is not afraid of her mother, but there is a conflict between them. Her mother became a beggar and earns Rs 600 to Rs 1,000 per day. When she was here, she earned only Rs 6,000 per month. Now her income is more than Rs 25,000 per month. Therefore, she wants her daughter to become a beggar and to earn more money". Then I asked Nani, "How can she keep records of this sort of money?" Nani was not interested any more, so she said, "Go and talk to your niece".

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When I came out of Nani's room, I saw Shazia was arguing with the washman who had brought the weekly laundry (speaking in Punjabi, yet while she was talking to me and other family members she spoke in very clear Urdu). She was annoyed and said, *"You did not clean Aleena's dress properly, there are still marks"*. The washman said, *"These are permanent marks which will not go"*. Shazia said, *"I will clean it, and next time you will see that there is no mark on her dress"* (she had learned some techniques of stain removal from a TV programme). *You are not doing your work efficiently. Stay here, I will bring my notebook and check the laundry"*. She brought her diary and opened it at the page where she had written the items for the laundry (by practice she had learned the names of clothes). She said to the washman, *"Count and hand over each item to me. There should be eight pants"*. The washman counted and handed over the items to her. She checked and said, *"Next item"* and so on. When she said, *"Ten ladies' shirts"*, the washman counted them and said *"Ten"*; but she sensed that something was wrong, so she checked herself and found that there were only nine ladies' shirts and one was missing. Again, she was cross with him and said, *"You are cheating. You are not a fair man and I will ask Baji [Rida] to arrange for some other man to do the laundry. You are a cheater"*. The argument became very serious, so Aleena's brother came and asked, *"What happened?"* I was just quietly observing and waiting to see how this matter would be resolved. Now that the matter became more public, I saw that the washman had quietly added one missing shirt without bringing it to Shazia's attention. He challenged the accusation and said, *"You can count, there are 10 shirts"*. Shazia, not realizing what he had done, said, *"Yes, let us count the shirts"*.

When the shirts were counted, there were 10 shirts. Shazia was very embarrassed and said in Urdu, *"I checked, but there were only nine shirts, now there are ten. I was not wrong"*. The washman was smiling, pleased that she had been proved wrong. I stepped in and said, *"Shazia was right; he added this shirt later on"*. In the end, the washman was given a last warning and asked to apologise to Shazia. He refused to do so, and consequently he was asked to come again because nobody was happy with his work. **[See Plate I]**

## Domestic servant

3-11-07	توپفہ	6 عدد
	پیرف	8 عدد
	یاد	2 عدد
	تولیف	2 عدد
	مکبض	10 عدد
	شلوار	8 عدد
<hr/>		
		36 عدد

27.10.07	پیرف	6 عدد
	شلوار	5 عدد
	دوپٹہ	4 عدد
	تولیف	2 عدد
	پینٹا	4 عدد
	تشر	10 عدد
<hr/>		
		32 عدد
	چار دو لائیاں	
	کل پورے 105	
	دھبی روپیے	

Shazia is responsible for giving the laundry to the washman every week and at the end of each month to settle the account. These are the scanned pages of Shazia's laundry record. She has written them herself and learned this from Rida and Aleena. A good example of on-the-job learning skills. The laundry record dated 3.11.07 shows that there were ten shirts, not nine. This was the source of conflict between Shazia and the washman and was the reason why he lost his job. The laundry record dated 27.10.2007 shows that in this month the laundry went 4 times to the washman and there were 105 pieces of laundry. Shazia usually keeps the records of the laundry and shows them to Rida at the end of each month. Rida then gives this amount to Shazia to pay the washman.

Rida also gave her money to buy the vegetables from the market. Suddenly Rida asked her, "I gave you Rs 500 yesterday. What did you buy?" Shazia went to another room, returning with a book, which she showed to Rida. She said, "This is what I spent." I said, "Could I see this book?" She said, "I could not show you. You are highly educated and I have not even attended a school, you will laugh at me". I promised that I would not laugh.

Then she showed me the book. I was impressed. Her handwriting was clear and readable, there were spelling mistakes (from the dictionary point of view) but the message was very clear, and what she wanted to record and say was comprehensible. Again, she said that she learned from TV,

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from Aleena and from every member of the family. She did not mention her neighbours.

9.16.07	
500	پانے کی رقم
150	ایک کپڑا کوشت
24	دو کپڑا کلو
20	پیرا کلو
180	مرتن
<hr/>	
374	کل خرچہ
126	بقایا

*Scanned page of Shazia's notebook, which shows the record of Rupees 500 which Rida gave her. She spent Rupees 374 to buy meat and vegetables and the balance shows Rupees 126. Rida gives her money in advance so she will not have any problems in case food items in the kitchen have finished or some unexpected guests have arrived. She keeps a record of the expenses and shows them to Rida whenever this is requested.*

Then she took me to the pantry in the kitchen. She kept her stuff in a cupboard, which had been designated, for her own use. She opened her cupboard, and I saw that there were storybooks that Aleena gave her when she was little, newspaper cuttings, which she collected from the garbage and a slate, and some chalk. She also showed me portions of the wall in the room next to the kitchen which is allotted to her, where she put picture charts of spices, cereals, kitchen articles, the vegetables, fruits and groceries and other household articles with their names and told me that she learned by using all of them. She said that these posters are fulltime teachers for her and she learned from them without any hesitation or embarrassment as well as learning from Rida, Aleena and other members of the house. She could read some words from the posters in English, as they were used in the household everyday. **[See Plate II]**

## Domestic servant

Then I realised that the house unwittingly provided many literacy situations which not only provided her with opportunities to learn basic reading and writing by copying, but which also provided opportunities to practise literacy skills. She said, "*Nowadays* Aleena is teaching me how to use a mobile, and then she will buy a mobile for me. That way she can be in touch with me and call me from college. If she is bringing some friends with her, then I can cook food for them".

At 8 o'clock in the evening, she served dinner to the family and after that, she had her dinner and washed the dishes. At about 9.30, she went home. Before going home, she asked permission from Rida that she could go home early the next day. When Rida asked why, she said that she was going with her family and relatives to the cinema to watch a very famous film, 'Khuda key Liya' (In the name of God). I said, "How do you know if it is a good film?" She told me the story of the film, which was about the events around September 11<sup>th</sup>. It showed extremism in America, how Muslims were treated after September 11, and two versions of Islam, an extreme version and a moderate version. She was very excited about going to see the film. During my stay in Pakistan, I had noticed that almost everyone was talking about this film. Perhaps because of this conversation with Shazia, I arranged with the rest of the family to go to the cinema to see it. It was the first time in almost 20 years that I have been to the cinema in Pakistan.

I noticed that throughout the day, Shazia is practising many literacy skills and attending to literacy events, which are helping her in her job. This generates a big question for me - could any literacy centre help her with the type of literacy she wants? Can literacy centres go beyond primers?

## Street beggar

### ***THE STORY OF RANA, THE STREET BEGGAR***

During my visit to Pakistan in November 2007, I stayed at the house of my niece Rida for three days. I noticed that Rana, the housemaid of almost sixteen years, had been replaced by her daughter Shazia. There was a conflict between Shazia and her mother because the latter wanted Shazia to join her and help her to earn more money by begging (see pages 16-28 above). Shazia thought that this was a disrespectful and disgraceful way to earn money and had vowed that she would never join her mother in this enterprise. Shazia asked Rida to intervene and convince her mother that she should not involve Shazia in this scheme. I had asked Rida about the situation and its background, and she told me the whole story.

One day Rana (Shazia's mother) had a fight with her daughter-in-law who immediately asked her to leave the house. She left the house and sat on the roadside in some distress. She was thinking how to solve this family issue. Her head was down and she was worried that if her son backed his wife and asked her to leave the house, then she would be in great trouble. Suddenly she realised that passers by were giving her money, assuming that she was a beggar. Within three or four hours, she had collected Rs 257. She was not at all ashamed that people had assumed that she was a beggar. Being a beggar is not very acceptable in Pakistani society, but Rana was happy that without doing any work she had collected a huge amount of money (for her) in only a few hours. On returning to the house, she bought fruits for her grandchildren. She felt confident that because of the money, they would think twice about kicking her out. Rana's daughter-in-law was surprised to see such a lot of money in her hand, but she did not ask where it came from. She was happy that her children were eating quality fruits. However, when Rana told Shazia how she got the money, Shazia was very cross and refused to use this money. She was very unhappy with her mother but she could not stop her while all the family members were supporting Rana as a beggar, and were happy that so much money was coming into the home.

Rana decided to become a beggar. However, she did not know how to beg, so for four days she carefully observed beggars and how they performed. She met the beggar's community in-charge person for this area and requested him to allocate a place for her to beg. Usually, areas of begging are fixed, and the in-charge

## Street beggar

beggars of these areas allot places for new beggars. The general perception is that beggars' communities are united and have developed certain rules, which must be followed. I was told that even the police could not intervene because they bribe the police. Beggars can be found everywhere in Karachi city. After observing the beggars, Rana decided to develop her own begging style. She sat near the busy shopping centre where she had been allocated a place with, I assume, the understanding that she will pay a certain amount to the in-charge beggar every month, but Rana denied this. She did not ask for money directly, but by her non-verbal behaviour suggested to the public that she is an old, needy woman whose family has abandoned her. By her guiles, she was successful in attracting the sympathies of people and they started giving money to her. I went to the shopping centre to observe Rana doing her new 'job'.

Rana told me that her everyday earnings were between Rs 500 to Rs 700. That is a lot of money, and on special occasions, she managed to collect more than Rs 1,000. People also gave clothes and other things to her. She claimed that her monthly income is between Rs 20,000 to Rs 30,000; when working in Rida's house, her salary was Rs 6,000 per month plus free food and clothing (which was considered a reasonable amount). However, the money earned by begging changed her family status. Within one year, she bought two auto rickshaws and rented them out to her relatives who were jobless. Each day, she receives Rs 500 rent for the auto rickshaws, plus an average of Rs 500 from the begging. So her income per day totals more than Rs 1,000. Even a doctor or a government high officer does not earn this level of income, so she is very happy with this situation. Rana started to help her relatives who were needy and wanting to start some sort of business but did not have any start-up money. Rana lends them money, taking a minimum of 2% profit.

I was intrigued to know how she maintains detailed records of such large amounts. She and her family have never before in their lives had to deal with such large amounts of money and I was curious to know where she had learned to deal with the record keeping. Therefore, I decided to spend two or three hours with Rana in her house. Rida was not at all happy and found it unacceptable that I intended to spend time in her maid's house. I explained my purposes, but she said that she would call Rana to her house. I explained that I wanted to see her in her real situation. At last, Rida agreed.

## Street beggar

I went to see Rana in her house after 7 o'clock in the evening. Rana showed great respect towards me and was ready to tell me her story whole-heartedly. I was only interested to know how she managed and recorded her finances. Rana belonged to a very poor family and nobody from her family in the last three or four generations had been to formal school. Women in the family mostly work as housemaids in different houses, and the males are usually casual labourers, not having permanent jobs. Rana said, "*We never have enough money. Our houses are kachcha houses (not made of concrete and cement); we cannot afford fruits and meat and even cannot avail ourselves of reasonable health facilities owing to the lack of money*".



*Rana is in her own kitchen making tea. People of her class normally have a stove on the floor, sitting on a small stool to cook food and make chapatti (local bread or naan). While working at Rida's house, Rana changed the kitchen to this more modern style. When Rana goes begging, she completely changes her appearance, so that people like myself who know her cannot recognise her at first glance.*

She spoke about the history of her family and I allowed her to talk about whatever she wanted to share with me. She told me that now she earns per day more than Rs 1000 minimum, which means that, as a beggar, she claims her earnings are more than Rs 30,000 per month, a lot of money for a woman who was earning Rs 6,000 per month as a housemaid. I asked her, "Do you keep your money in the bank or at home?" She said that she

## Street beggar

never keeps money in the bank, but she has a secret place where she keeps the money and nobody knows where that is or when she puts it there.

She begs from 7.30am to 6.30 pm. I asked, "Why do you go so early?" Rana said, "*This is the time when the mothers and fathers drop their kids to school and give money to me*". After 6.30pm, Rana counts her change and money. She first separates the coin denominations and counts them, followed by the separate values of the notes. Then she goes along to the shopkeepers and changes this money into Rs 100 or Rs 500 notes. Every shopkeeper needs change, so this is a mutually convenient arrangement. If there is some change left, she gives it to other beggars or buys fruits or toys for her grandchildren.

Rana told me that she is now a member of the beggars' community, so she has to pay a certain amount to the man (a beggar) who has allowed her to use his area for begging. Beggars have very clear rules, they have a certain area where they can beg and other beggars cannot come to that area. They follow these beggar's community rules very strictly.

Rana learned all these rules and the culture when she started begging and met other beggars. She attends the monthly meetings of beggars in her area. At these meetings, the in-charge beggar makes a speech and if beggars in his areas have problems, they discuss them and try to solve these problems. Every beggar must follow the decisions which are made in these meetings and approved by the in-charge beggar.

Rana wanted her jobless relatives to get a job or do some business. Therefore, she lends money to those who are interested. She keeps a record of these loans, which she has made to her relatives.

She showed me a box which has twelve compartments. She also has cards of various colours, the colour representing different values:

Red colour represents Rs 5,000

Yellow colour represents Rs 1,000

Blue colour represents Rs 500

Green colour represents Rs 100.

**[See Plate III]**

## Street beggar

When she lends money, she adopts the following procedure, which she demonstrated to me. Two examples follow which illustrate the use of her money-lending box.

### *Example 1.*

She lent Rs 7,000 to her relative Khalid for seven months. He was her nephew, so she said she would not take any profit. Khalid agreed to return Rs 1,000 per month.

She gave one red card (value 5,000) and two yellow cards (value 2,000) to Khalid and asked him to sign or put his thumb impression on these cards and the date. She herself had learned how to write the date and sign her name. In addition, she reserved seven yellow cards without Khalid's signature or thumb impression but she put her signature on each card. She said to Khalid, *"When you return my entire amount, then I will tear up the cards which you signed. Secondly, when you return me Rs 1,000 monthly, I will give you one yellow card with my signature as proof that you have returned that amount to me. At the end, you will bring all the cards which I have signed and I will tear up the cards with your signature"*. She showed me that Khalid had returned Rs 2,000 and said, *"Now I have only five yellow cards with my signature and Khalid has two yellow cards with my signature"*. She said *"This system is working very well, but I lend money to only my relatives or the community beggar's family if they need it, on the approval of the community in-charge beggar"*.

I asked her, *"Where and how did you learn to do your signature and write the date?"* She said, *"I learned to do my signature and writing dates when I was working in Rida's house. I also learned many things there, particularly record keeping of groceries and kitchen stuff. Rida helped me to learn and then I was practising for many years. Money record keeping I learned from my beggar's fellow. This is common in the community of beggars to which I belong"*.

### *Example 2*

While I was sitting in Rana's house, Gulab Khan came and told Rana that he wanted to pay his last instalment and to say "thank you" for Rana's support. He said that he had arranged a cart, located in front of a factory, and sells biryani that his wife cooks. He saves Rs 600 and more per day and the factory workers like

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his biryani a lot. Moreover, gradually his biryani is becoming famous.

Gulab Khan had borrowed Rs 8,000 with a promise that he will return this amount in four months without profit. He brought six yellow cards with Rana's signature on them, which means he had already returned Rs 6,000 to Rana. He gave Rs 2,000 to Rana who gave him one red card and three yellow cards with his signature on them, which means he had cleared his debt. Rana tore up all the yellow cards containing her signature which Gulab Khan returned to her. She said, *"Now Gulab Khan's account is closed, so there is no point in keeping these cards"*. In Rana's family, she is regarded as a helpful lady and she has gained their respect, in spite of the fact that many people are not happy with her begging, but when they need money, they come to Rana.

### **[See Plate IV]**

I found it fascinating that Rana never thought to become a beggar, but accidentally became a beggar, learned all the skills in the workplace and adopted the culture of the beggar community. She started helping those who are in need, assisting people to start their own small businesses. She said to me, *"Now I will never force Shazia to become a beggar. I promised myself that I will never encourage anybody in my family to become a beggar, but I will not give up this job until and unless my family will be settled and have their own businesses. So we will not be poor and my generation will not be poor. Poverty is very bitter, very bitter. I will send my son to the Gulf. In addition, my future generation will not suffer"*. I found it very enlightening the way she developed a simple recording system which for her is foolproof. This case study tells a lot about how local, needs-based literacies and numeracies develop and grow in the culture to which they belong.

## **WHAT COLOUR IS YOUR RAINBOW? INTEGRATING NATURE'S COLOURS INTO EVERYDAY LANGUAGE: ROZINA THE DYER.**

During an Education Sector Reform Assistance ESRA programme funded by USAID, with the coordination of the NGO, Sindh Development Society Hyderabad, a Learning Resource Centre (LRC) was established initially by the community and later upgraded in terms of resources by ESRA/USAID as a post-literacy initiative. The overall goal was to sustain the literacy skills which the literacy graduates had learned in the literacy classes, and to provide a facility for women, in particular where they can meet regularly for their on-going learning activities in the way they prefer. ESRA's support was in terms of providing the salary for the LRC coordinator for one year or less. This had been approved by the NGO and the community in terms of what they can afford after ESRA's support. ESRA also had to provide books, basic furniture etc. on a one-off basis. The ESRA support was suspended after one year in September 2006. I was curious to know what had happened to this LRC, one year after donor support had ceased. What role was it now playing in the life of the community? How is the community organising this LRC?

I was returning after spending the day in the LRC at Piyaro Lund, District Tando Allahyar. On my way back, I saw a woman waving her hand at me. In response, I waved my hand, but soon realised that she was trying to catch our attention. I asked the driver to stop the car, and with her husband, she came to shake my hand. She said, *"I did not know you are coming here, otherwise I would not have gone out"*. I asked, *"Where are you coming from?"* Her husband replied, *"We went to Hyderabad [the second largest city of the province of Sindh and one and a half hours drive by bus from Piyaro Lund] for some shopping"*. I said, *"You went shopping with your wife?"* Both laughed and said, *"Yes, a change has happened"*. (It is very unusual in rural areas of Sindh that a wife goes shopping with her husband). She said, *"Now I can read and write and do better shopping than him, so he feels proud and takes me with him. Thanks to ESRA literacy efforts, they provided us with LRC, a platform where we can learn and organise activities like short courses and programmes on a needs-basis."*

*"You did not remember me? I am Rozina [her name has been changed at her request]. I was in your Literacy Centre but because*

*of pregnancy, I left the centre. However, the teacher and my friends were very kind; they came to my home and taught me on a regular basis what they had learned in the centre. Unfortunately, I was marked absent in the attendance register of the literacy centre.*

*However, I was able to rejoin the centre in the second phase of the literacy course. I loved the second phase". I said, "What did you like in this phase?" She said, "The skills training and discussions are fun and reveal very useful information. The language games really make the centre lively. I play the same games at home with my husband and Amma (mother-in-law) and other family members. They all enjoy these games and learn bits of reading and writing especially the names of things". She also added, "Unfortunately, I was not able to appear in the exam, as the condition of appearing was a 60% attendance record which I did not have. I wish ESRA did not make this condition. But I am happy that I can read and write, and call myself literate".*

I wanted to talk to her as much as possible because I enjoyed her degree of confidence and her relaxed attitude. Her husband realised that we were talking on the road. He said, *"Please come into our house and have a cup of tea".* I thought that I must take this opportunity and see the inside of the house. Together with my colleague who was travelling with me, we accepted their offer and I asked them to come with us in the car. Her husband guided the driver using English words (like 'turn right', 'straight on', 'turn left', 'stop after the green house'). Rozina obviously noted my surprise at this and said, *"My husband was my 'Buddy' in the Family Reading Programme (FRP) and he learned all these English words from me. Now he has more opportunities to use these words and I have limited opportunity to practise using them. Therefore, we have decided that we will use all names in English at home, so that the children will pick them up. For them it is a matter of satisfaction and pride that they can speak words in English and consider that they know English".* (Afterwards a neighbour of Rozina said, *"Rozina can speak English, which she learned from the Literacy Centre and I am learning it from her".* After 5 minutes, we reached her house. As soon as I saw her house, I remembered that I had visited her house before and also met her mother-in-law. Rozina took us into a room and quickly spread a *rilly* [a traditional bed cover made of hundreds of pieces of coloured cloth, a kind of a traditional patchwork] on the *charpai* [a

traditional local bed made of knitted jute with four carved wood, hand-painted bedposts].

Rozina's mother-in-law came and sat near us. She was very happy that we had come inside her house. She said, "*God will give you a reward for what you did for our area*". I said, "Amma, thank you very much, but I did not do anything. You did everything, like giving permission for your daughter-in-law to join the Literacy Centre and later on you gave permission to initiate a Family Reading Programme in your house".

The room where we sat was a large and clean room containing a cassette player, TV and VCR, with lots of Indian and Pakistani film CDs. Amma said, "*We are very fond of Indian films. We watch films two or three times a week*". Amma and her family were also regular watchers of Indian and Pakistani dramas. There was an open cupboard in the room containing many plastic bottles with coloured powder in each one. The name of the colour was written on each bottle. Rozina told me that she had written these names. There were spelling mistakes but the meaning was clear. The room where we were sitting was built of local bricks and my attention was drawn to one wall. I noticed on one side there were in-built, open shelves full of story books for children, religious history books, women's magazines, cooking recipes, hand written story books and books of newspaper cuttings. The shelves were labelled "Reading Corner" in Urdu, Sindhi (the provincial language, medium of instruction for the literacy centres and the native language of the majority of people in Sindh) and English. When Amma noticed I was looking at the Reading Corner, she came towards me and said, "*We added many magazines after the FRP programme. My son, when he goes to the city, buys second hand magazines and Rozina reads them for me. She reads children's stories for her children and women's stories for me.*" Rozina added, "*And I learn personal grooming techniques from the magazines*". We talked about the Reading Corner.

They built this reading corner during her Family Reading Programme. I picked up a few books and checked them randomly. It looked as though these books had been read many times. The corners of the books were turned and marked with pencils. I saw some booklets where newspaper cuttings about personal grooming were all glued in. When Amma noticed that I had taken an interest in the story books, she became very excited and said to her daughter-in-law, "*Rozina, bring my tarbuzi bag*" [*tarbuzi* means the colour of watermelon on the inside]. Rozina brought the



reasonably large and the rooms opened on to the veranda surrounding the muddy courtyard which had one mango and one neem tree. One side of the courtyard was reserved for domestic animals, and I could see hens, cocks, chickens and three goats.

Rozina's younger sister, who was also the next door neighbour, brought tea and snacks and sat down with us. While we were enjoying tea and snacks served by Rozina, and talking about the reading corner, a little child from the neighbours came and said to Rozina, "*Rozina Baji, Amma [his mother] is asking, Did you dye her dupatta [long scarf about 2.5 yards long, which women use to cover their head and around the shoulders] in masoori colour [red/orange lentil which is called 'Masoor Dal' in the local language] ?*" Rozina said, "*You can take her dupatta and say to your mother that I will collect the money later on*".

I noticed during my stay in Rozina's house that twice the usual colour name was not used; instead the colour was identified using the natural appearance of fruits and lentils. I asked Rozina why she did not use the usual colour names like red or orange. I asked her, "Do you not know the names of the colours?" Rozina said, "*I know the names of colours in Sindhi, Urdu and some names in English. However, here in this village, the tradition is to associate the colour name with natural things and very few people, particularly women, use the common colour name*". I said, "Did you not try to tell them the name of the colours?" She said, "*Initially I tried, but I feel more comfortable to name them with the natural colours*". Amma joined in the discussion about colour, and said, "*Why should we use an artificial name while God has given us natural things to use to identify colour and we borrow their names? At least in this way we are thanking God*". An interesting philosophy, but I respected Amma's point of view and could see her point. I asked Amma and Rozina, "Could you give me the names of the natural things from which you borrow a colour name and use in your daily life?"

Amma, Rozina, and Rozina's husband who had just entered the room, joined in the discussion and told me the names which they and also the community used in their daily life. Rozina said that she regularly used these natural names rather than the usual names which she knows. They told me several names and I noticed that they did indeed use these names during normal family conversations. For example, instead of saying "dark green", they say "mint colour".

<b>Local (natural) name</b>	<b>Usual Colour name</b>
Mint colour	Dark Green
Red Chilli colour	Bright Red
Aubergine colour	Violet Colour
Pomegranate colour	Deep red
Onion colour	Light purple
Masoori colour (colour of masoori lentil)	Reddish Orange
Olive colour	Shade of green
Peach colour	Peach
Plum Colour (Jhar berry kay baire, a kind of plum)	Deep Red
Lemon Colour	Light yellow
Cherry Colour	Maroon
Parrot Colour	A shade of green
Sky Colour	Light blue
Sea colour	Dark blue
Grass colour	A shade of bright green
Papaya colour	Yellow
Ash colour	Grey
Dove colour	Light brown
Shesham colour (Shesham is a tree and its wood colour is brown)	Brown
Walnut colour	Medium shade of Brown
Teak colour	Dark brown

Amma asked Rozina, "Could you show her the dupattas which you dyed for your friends and neighbours?" Rozina brought a bundle of dupattas which she had dyed in different colours. I noticed that on each duppata there was a slip where she had written the name of the person, the local name of the colour, plus in brackets the usual colour name and finally the price. She showed me eight dupattas, and I noted four comments on each paper pinned to the dupattas.

Yasmeen

Mint Colour (Dark green)

Rs 20

Salma

Mint and lemon colour (Dark green and light yellow)

Rs 40

Shamim  
Aubergine and Orange (Aubergine and orange)  
Rs 40

I asked Rozina, "When did you learn to dye and how did you start dyeing?" Rozina said, "*I learned dyeing from literacy classes, Part Two. My friends told me that I am very good in dyeing and in making designs on dupattas, so I started dyeing pieces of old cloth at home. With practice, I learned colour mixing. However, I had problems with some colours which I discussed with my husband. He said, "I know a dyer in Hyderabad and I will ask him about colour mixing". He learned from the dyer in the city and then he taught me. He also brings colours for me from the city, and a colour-seller also gave me some hints. Therefore, with information from the dyer, the colour-seller and with lot of practice, now I can dye in any colour and make designs.*

*"When my friends and relatives saw my dupattas and other things, which I had dyed, they requested me to dye for them also". Amma told them clearly, 'Rozina will not dye free, we will charge, but this will be less than the shop charges'. By this means, I started earning money. My hobby became a source of increased income. I also gained respect in my community, because I could earn money sitting at home. Amma is happy and cooperates with me". Amma said, "Now I will send my granddaughter to a private school. A little knowledge of reading and writing changed our home atmosphere, so I can imagine how much benefit there is in a proper education".*

Amma gave me a gift of a large dupatta and one storybook which she and Rozina had developed. **[See Plate V]**

It was amazing to think that one year before, Rozina claimed that she could neither read nor write. She had not initially learned from the Literacy Centre but rather from her literacy centre friends who helped her by teaching her at home. Because of her pregnancy, she only joined the literacy centre in the second half when the course content was more creative, skills-based and placed more emphasis on practical activities. She not only learned reading and writing but also sustained her literacy skills by joining the Family Reading Programme, and she later became a regular user of the LRC. She not only involved all her family in her literacy activities/practices but also became an earning member of the family. She taught her husband basic words which he needed as a farmer.

This episode raised many questions in my mind. How can a literacy course be developed keeping the local knowledge and practices in mind? Can one type of literacy be effective for the entire nation? How can literacy courses preserve indigenous knowledge and transfer this knowledge to the next generation? Is a literacy centre necessary or are there other alternative ways of learning, as Rozina learned from her colleagues?

Where does this example of social literacy fit into the broader literacy scenario?

Are policy makers whole heartedly learning the lesson from Rozina, that literacy can go beyond centres and beyond primers and attendance registers? A profound question to ponder.

## **DETERMINATION TO LEARN: AMEN BABA LEARNS THE LITERACY OF SELLING VEGETABLES**

It is common practice in Pakistan for vegetables to be sold from carts, which are moved from one area to another, in addition to the usual vegetable shops. This case study is about Amen, a vegetable seller, who goes from street to street to sell the vegetables from his cart.

Amen sells his vegetables in areas numbered 6 and 8 of Latifabad (Latifabad is a large suburb of Hyderabad in the province of Sindh). After the partition of India and Pakistan, many of the immigrant Muslims from India settled in this neighbourhood. Latifabad is split administratively into 12 areas. Area 8 is predominantly middle class, whilst areas 2, 6 and 7 are populated by upper middle class and rich people).

My relatives live in Latifabad and initially I lived in Latifabad, moving later on to live in Karachi. I have known Amen for the last forty years, as my mother was a keen customer and used to buy vegetables from him on a regular basis. Since moving to Karachi, I visit Hyderabad frequently on official business and sometimes to stay with my relatives or visit them. Whenever I see Amen, I greet him or he greets me, as he knows all the members of my family. He has been responsible for providing vegetables at family occasions such as parties, weddings etc. An educated guess would put him in his late sixties, as I can recall him relating stories about the 1947 partition, during which the train on which he was migrating came under attack and many people were killed.

During my last trip to Pakistan in November 2007, I visited my relatives in Latifabad and accepted their kind request to stay with them. In the morning, I was woken by Amen's loud voice proclaiming his presence and informing people of the contents of his cart. He was shouting "*Fresh potatoes are here, pumpkin is here, buy fresh carrots, I am the only one who sells good and fresh sweet water vegetables and river water vegetables. Better you will not find anywhere and it is also cheap.*" People tend to have favourite sellers, so by using such a loud voice, he made his presence felt and brought out of their homes those people who bought his vegetables on a regular basis, or who simply wanted to hear what he had to say. They come to the door or send their servants to buy vegetables. Sometimes women from two or three

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houses come together; they buy vegetables and talk to each other in an informal way. Amen is a great source of news about neighbouring areas because he moves from one area to another and spreads up-to-date news and gossip.

When I heard his voice, I went to the door to greet him. He was so happy to see me and asked, "*Baity, how are you? I see you after a long time.*" I said, "I am alright, how is your family?" He said, "*All are okay, but my youngest son, 13 years old is creating problems*". I asked, "Why is he creating a problem?" He said, "*I admitted him into an English medium school, but after one year he left school and said school is very boring. Other students make fun of him and say, 'Son of a vegetable seller is studying in English medium school. He wants to be equal of us. Ha-- ha -ha'. He left school, but he does not want to assist me as he got the impression that I am in a job which is not respectable, even if I have money. Now he is not doing anything. I want him to do his study or assist me in selling vegetables*". Amen told me that after an argument with his son, it was agreed that he will not go to school and initially he would assist his father in selling vegetables. The son would go to the wholesale vegetable market and bring vegetables for Amen to sell from door to door. His son would also keep records of daily expenses. Amen said that once he is confident that his son is capable of running the business separately, he would open a vegetable shop for him. The son does not like to go door to door and sell vegetables, so this was now a training period for him (like an internship or on-the-job training). I said, "It is good that you sorted out your problem".

During the conversation, when he came to know that I am still studying, he was so surprised and said, "*When will you finish your study?*" I asked him, "Amen Baba, have you ever been to school?" He said, "*Never ever. I wished I could but there was no school in my area and I was assisting my father when I was very small. But to see my son's school and his attitude, I am thankful that I did not go to school*". He continued and said, "*Now new people have come into my areas and they do not know me, old people have moved, migrated and/or sold their houses. Now my customers demand receipts and I take it as an insult to me that they do not trust me. They do the calculation on paper and I do it in my head. Although my calculation is always right and many occasions their calculations are wrong, but they insist that they are right because they are educated and just because I am not educated, therefore,*

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*I am wrong and I could be wrong. This hurts me a lot, but these are my customers, so I cannot say any harsh thing”.*

Meanwhile a lady came and asked the prices of different vegetables. Then she said, *“Give me 3kg tomatoes and 5kg potatoes, 1kg okra, 5 rupees green chillies, 5 rupees mint, 3 rupees coriander, and two or three vegetables in small quantity”.* While Amen was weighing the vegetables, she again asked the prices. He told her again the price of the vegetables per kilogram. He weighed all the required vegetables and put them in the basket, which she had brought. While he was putting the vegetables in the basket, I noticed that he was calculating in the mouth, I could see his lip movements. He handed over the basket to the lady and said, *“162 rupees”.* The lady said, *“No, count it again”.* He said, *“You count it and tell me how much? If there is a difference, I will give it to you free”.* She took out a calculator and started calculating again. In the meanwhile, he dealt with two other customers who came and asked for vegetables. He weighed the vegetables for them and told them the total cost. They paid and went away. However, the lady was still struggling with the calculator. At last, she paid the total money, which he had asked for and said, *“I will count it all at home and if there is a difference, then I will give you a tough time tomorrow”.* I myself had checked and realised that Amen's calculation was correct. When the lady left, he said with a cheeky smile, *“Baity, you know she teaches maths in school but is not able to do simple maths. That is the reason I do not like school education - just a waste of time. People like me need practical skills like selling, marketing and record keeping, profit and loss calculation. Tell me, which school is teaching us all this in a short time, that which is useful for our small business and to attract our customers? Anyway, I worked out and solved my problem without going to any school or centre”.*

Meanwhile many women had gathered and I knew a few of them. They were very happy to see me and invited me into their house. I said, *“Another time”*, and thanked them. I did not want to waste his earning time, but I did want to know more about his business. His actions and words had attracted my attention. I wanted to know more about how he was keeping his money records, how he was solving his problems, how he had learned without going to school or a centre, how he developed songs to sell his vegetables, and who helped him. I wanted answers to all of these questions, which were in my mind. I was still thinking how I could request him to spare some time to talk more about these

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matters. He said, "*I wish I could attend a special school like adult schools which can teach us all these*". Then he said, "*Perhaps schools are not the solution of my problem because school teaching is far away from the practical world.*" He realised that he was lacking something, but he also realised that formal education was not the solution to his problem.

I was a little surprised when he used the words 'Adult school' and 'Centre' in his conversation, and asked, "How do you know about 'adult school' and what is your opinion about adult school?" I was so surprised about his knowledge, so without realising it, I had asked two questions together. Again with a cheeky grimace (perhaps thinking that I am the idiot, not him) he said, "*Can't you see the big boards all over the city about adult education and adult literacy centres. Centre is not the solution for this problem; I wonder why you and highly educated people cannot understand these simple things.*" I realised that he was referring to advertising boards, which are placed all over the country by an organisation which provides a three-month literacy, book-based course.

I was interested to know what plan he had developed for himself to sort out his workplace literacy problem, but I did not want to spoil his earning time. I said that I wanted to talk to him, and asked if he could spare two or three hours of his time for me. I suggested that he could come to my relative's home where I was staying or I could go to his house. He was so happy that I am willing to visit to his house, saying "*Bibi, you are Syed [I belong to a Syed family; Syed is a caste among Muslims and is regarded as a very respectful supreme caste] and we cannot give the respect to which a Syed is entitled but this is an honour for me*". In the end, we agreed that he would come in the evening and we would talk. If there was a need for further clarification, he would come on the next evening. He said that he was free in the evening, so he could come and talk to me for as long as I wanted.

I talked to my aunt; she is very kind and said, "*No problem*". I said that I wanted him to sit in the living room and to receive the same respect as any other guest would receive. My aunt was not happy with the idea that he would sit in the drawing room. She did not say that a vegetable seller cannot sit in the drawing room but very diplomatically, she said, "*You will be disturbed if some guests come and sits in the drawing room while you are interviewing him*". I said, "I am not taking his interview, it is just a chit-chat session". Eventually she agreed and said, "*He can stay in the living room*".

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About five o'clock, he came to the house and rang the bell. I opened the door and brought him into the drawing room. He was wearing a very clean, white shirt and shalwar, while in the morning his dress had been very dirty with lots of spots. His hair was freshly cut and combed; I suspect that he had been to a hairdresser before coming to the house. He was very hesitant to come into the living room and suggested that we sat on the lawn instead. I asked him to come into the living room (I wanted to give him the impression that he is respected no less than any other guest). He accepted my request and came into the living room but before entering, he took off his shoes. I said, "There is no need to take off your shoes". But he did take off his shoes. He sat on the sofa and I offered him tea with snacks. He was very thankful and started a prayer for me. *"As you respected small people like me and gave an honour, God will give you very bigger honour and respect."* I said, "Amen Baba, keep me in your prayers". He said, *"I pray that you will live in the heart of the people and God will give you what you want to achieve. But Baity, never be greedy and always do something for the poor of your country"*. I promised that whatever I can do, I will not hesitate to do that. Now with the initial rapport building, he was relaxing and his initial hesitation was going away. I got his permission to write his story. He allowed me to do that, but could not understand where I could write his story. He said that he had full faith in me and my family and that I would never do any harm to him. I said, "Thank you very much for having trust in me."

Now we were sitting in front of each other and having tea with snacks. When I realised that he was comfortable, I initiated chatting, keeping my overall aim in mind. No paper and pencil were available. He allowed me to record his conversation, but he did not realise how I was recording the proceedings. I recorded the conversation using one of the latest mobile phones. He was very honest and relaxed. At the end, I replayed part of our conversation back to him so he could hear what had been recorded. He was so emotional and happy to hear his voice and said, *"How did you record it, I did not see a tape recorder?"* I showed him my mobile phone's recorder and asked him if it was okay to use this for my paper. He said that he had no problem with this.

I said, "Baba, your voice is very good and attracts people when you come in the morning and call your customers by singing songs about vegetables. Who writes these songs for you?" Amen shied away and said, *"Do you like it? Women and children like these*

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*songs and request me to sing these songs quite often. I make up my own songs and I sing to attract my customers. I think more customers buy vegetables from me in comparison to others. I also bring fresh vegetables."* I asked, "But Baba, who tells you about the benefits and idioms related to vegetables?" Amen did not like my statement and said, "*I am not educated and cannot read and write (although he can read and write but just believes that he cannot) but it does not mean that I am a fool and have no wisdom."*

I said, "That's great. Amen Baba, please sing some vegetable songs for me." He accepted my request and sang four songs in Urdu, which he had developed, for himself. The following is a translation of a few lines of the four songs, which he sang at my request. (I feel some difficulty in translating these songs into English, as it is hard to give a true impression without extensive explanations of the inferences and meaning of some of the words).

### *Song One: Carrot song*

Come sisters, come brothers  
Come dear kids and come sweet daughters come  
Come Amma and you also come Abba  
Buy, otherwise you will regret  
Vegetables are fresh, cheap and at your door

Look, look at my vegetable cart  
Beautiful spring came on my cart  
These are carrots,  
Eat and sharpen your eyesight;  
Cauliflower and mustard are also here  
Ho ho ho, wah wah wah  
La la ray la la la ray la [local style of giving rhythm]

### *Song 2: Spinach song*

Today I come and bring magic for you  
Dear children, come and get spinach from me  
I brought fresh spinach for you  
Your mother will cook for you  
Soup or gravy or with meat  
You will be strong like Popeye  
You will be healthy like your father  
Spinach will bring spring for you  
Healthy strong and lovely

Come Sonia, Dolly and Pappu [he changes the names according to the areas where he goes and the names of the local children].

### *Song 3: Aubergine song*

Look look

Thali ka begun\* laya

Buy here and reach in Hyderabad Dakkin

Cook Hyderabad Begum\*

Aha very tasty very tasty

Shiny violet and purple

\* A person who vacillates is called thali ka began (began is called aubergine and this is an idiom in Urdu).

\*Hyderabad Bagharay Begun is a famous dish in India and Pakistan and is very spicy. It originated in Hyderabad Dakk in India.

### *Song 4: Bitter gourd song*

Fresh and green

Coming directly from field

It will not be sour

I promise if you will cook the way I tell you

You have no skin problem

It will purify your blood

It will purify your blood.

I promise, promise and promise.

These songs are taken from Amen Baba's diary. In Step 4 of his learning programme, Amen Baba wrote down these songs, which he had developed before he learned to write. Some strong features are prominent in these songs. As can be seen from the translations, some of the distinctive features of these vegetables are described in these songs. He drew vegetables in their own colours on the sheet **[See Plate VI]** and used idioms, medicinal properties, colours and cooking recipes in the songs. These features make the songs very informative and educational. After practice, his writing and spelling improved and he made fewer mistakes from a dictionary point of view.

He also gives tips to women about how to cook. My aunt told me that Amen is a very good cook. On special occasions, neighbours have hired him to cook different dishes at dinner parties. I was very impressed.

Amen told me, "One day last week Begum Sahiba [he was referring to my aunt] requested me to develop some songs for her

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*granddaughter Hira, who wanted to organise in her school a vegetable mushaera [a kind of poetry contest where poets present their poems on different themes], so I developed 10 poems for her school function on ten vegetables. I dictated them to Hira and she has written them in her notebook. Hira was very, very happy and she selected 10 students from class three to class five and each student had a costume of different vegetables and presented their poems on vegetables. Her item won a prize in the schools' function. Hira told her Principal that I had developed these poems for her. Begum Shiba has given me a gift and money. Now I will sing these poems to attract little ones and their mothers towards the fresh vegetables. I have developed tunes for the ten vegetables songs."*

I said, "Great! How did you know that Popeye [the famous cartoon character] got his strength from spinach, which you mention in your poem on spinach?" He said, "I watch cartoons with great interest and Popeye the Sailor is my favourite cartoon. I told you I am not educated but I am not an idiot."

"But Baba, this is in English", I said with great hesitation. He said, "So what? I do not understand English but I do understand the story and can tell you the story." Very interesting. I said, "Baba, why don't you ask one of your children to write down all these poems which you have developed, otherwise you will forget them after some time?" He said, "I asked my children to write them down for me in my diary but they did not do it, as they do not like me to sing on the roads. But this is my livelihood and I do not feel any shame in doing this. You are the first one to appreciate what I am doing. I have written them myself and my children do not know that I can write, of course not like you people, but I can write for myself". I said, "Yes, but aunty also acknowledged your skills by requesting you that you develop some poems for her granddaughter". He said, "Yes, now Hira will take my interview for her school newsletter". He said suddenly, "Oh! I forgot to tell you, Hira gave me a present, guess what! A present". He took out a diary from his coat pocket. In this diary, Hira had written his vegetable poems, which he developed for the school function. He was very happy and a little bit emotional that somebody had acknowledged his talent and efforts. He said, "Now I will draw pictures of vegetables to make it colourful on each page of the poems." I said, "Baba, you complete this poem book. I will try to computerise your books along with your pictures when I come next time. Also try to write on other topics of the society.

About anything which is in your heart and you are happy or unhappy about that." Baba was so happy to hear this.

I asked, "Amen Baba, do you keep some diary as you said you requested your son to write in your diary?" Initially Amen Baba said "No", and then he became quiet for some time. I did not interfere and gave him some time. After a while he looked at me and his eyes were full of tears. I said, "Amen Baba, I am sorry if I hurt your feelings". He said, "*No, not at all. God will give you reward that you are respecting me and showing an interest in my poems. I will show you my diary. Once I showed it to some students, who were in 10<sup>th</sup> class and requested them to correct the Urdu spellings. They made fun of me and laughed as if I am a Joker. They said, 'Look, a vegetable seller, he wishes to become a poet, very funny'. On that day, I promised myself that I would never ever share my poems with anybody in my life. But I am breaking my promise and showing to you.*" I said, "Amen Baba, leave it if it hurts you, I don't want to hurt your feelings." Amen Baba said, "*No, I want to share it; you have encouraged me and are showing respect and your aunty too was very kind*" and he started giving praise. He showed his red diary to me, it contained some dried leaves. Amen told me, "*I like red colour and I bought this diary in 2000*". When I opened the diary, there were mostly drawings, a big picture of a vegetable and small pictures related to this vegetable. I said, "You started your diary in the form of pictures on 14<sup>th</sup> August, one year after you bought it. So why did you buy this diary in 2000?" He said, "*This reminds me that this is the beginning of a new millennium. The 14<sup>th</sup> August is Independence Day, in the new millennium. This year I promised myself that I will learn to read and write and how to write receipts. Because times are changing and my customers need receipts. So I started to look for people who could help me. I was shy about asking people to teach me. I thought they will laugh at me as had the school boys that an old man instead of worshiping God wants to learn to read and write. Initially I could not find anyone who I could trust that would not hurt my intentions, so I decided that I would start learning by myself. So I went to Urdu Bazaar [a famous market of books and learning materials] and bought some vegetable charts and fruit charts with their names. Because my drawing is good, I thought that I could use it to learn the names. I prepared a work plan for myself. I promised myself that I would keep a strong commitment towards my learning, because it is one of the needs of my business, I am interested in it and it is also*

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*great fun. I can tell people that without proper schooling, one can learn basic things which are useful for their day to day small business”.*

Amen indicated to me his programme of learning with a little shyness and said, *“I know perhaps it will not make any sense to you but it is a great pride for me. I learned it myself with a little help from a kind lady. When I tried to get help from school-going children, they made fun of me in my old age”.*

Amen’s learning programme which he shared with me was in six steps. This is the closest translation that I can make:

**Step 1:** First, he pasted cut-outs from charts of vegetables and fruits into his notebook. Amen Baba copied the spellings of words in Urdu from the charts, then practised these spellings many times around the picture. If the spellings were difficult (like cauliflower, cucumber, and okra), he broke them up into small syllables and practised these separately. He also used different coloured pens to separate words from each other, so he could memorise the spellings in his ‘mental map’, as he explained to me. **[See PLATE VII]** He practised the words until he felt confident that he had correctly memorised the spellings and could write them down without looking at the charts. When he was successful in matching his writing with the original spelling, then he rewarded himself with a cup of tea – if not, then he practised again. A very simple but effective technique and a revelation for an adult literacy programme developer.

Once he felt confident that he could write the names of fruit and vegetables without looking at the chart, then he went on to the second step.

**Step 2:** He bought an ordinary notebook and made three columns on the page. He wrote different quantities, vegetable names, individual prices and the overall total. He checked this total using mental arithmetic. He did this many times. He showed me some of his practice notebooks and allowed me to keep one as a sample. When he felt that he could now produce a receipt, he had a discussion with one of his lady customers, Hamida, whom he felt he could trust. Hamida worked in a school and was a regular customer. She was in her late fifties, and when she saw Amen's commitment and interest, she promised to help him. She made the suggestion of the title of ‘Cash Book’ and showed him how to write “Amen vegetable seller”. She also taught him the proper use of a

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calculator. Amen started using the calculator but rechecked the total using mental arithmetic. If his mental answer and the calculator answer matched, then it was okay, but if not, then he trusted his own mental arithmetic. Amen told me that gradually he started using the calculator with accuracy, but he still has confidence in his mental maths. According to him, mental maths is fast and more reliable. Hamida told Amen that whenever he wants to learn any word, he can ask her and Amen was very pleased. In return, he said that he would charge less to Hamida, but she refused politely and said she did not want any favours. After attaining command of writing the receipts and names and the use of a calculator, he entered on the third phase.

امین سبزی فروش				امین سبزی فروش		
تاریخ 29-4-2007				تاریخ 8-2-2006		
قیمت	سبزی	S.No	رقم	سبزی	رقم	رقم
RS 32	سبزی	1	12 روپے	آلو	1	
RS 18	اروں	2	7 روپے	ٹیماٹر	2	
RS 90	آلو	3	3 روپے	ٹیماٹر		
RS 14	سبزی مرچ	4	6 روپے	ٹیماٹر	3	
RS 16	ٹیماٹر	5	2 روپے	کدو	4	
RS 15	کدو	6	2 روپے	ٹیماٹر	5	
RS 30	ٹیماٹر	7	3 روپے	ٹیماٹر		
RS 10	سبزی مرچ دھینا	8	3 روپے	ٹیماٹر		
کل قیمت RS 175				کل قیمت		

Two receipts randomly selected from Amen Baba's receipt book. Self-improvement is clearly seen. In the first receipt dated 5.8.2006 some words are written in separate syllables: in the second and later receipts, he himself corrected the spellings to dictionary spellings by using other texts or with the help of customers. His hand writing has become clearer. Fascinating proof and a live example of informal learning methodology.

**Step 3:** He learned to use a tape recorder. He developed some poems and recorded them using the recorder. He listened again and again. He wrote down those words which he could write and

## Vegetable seller

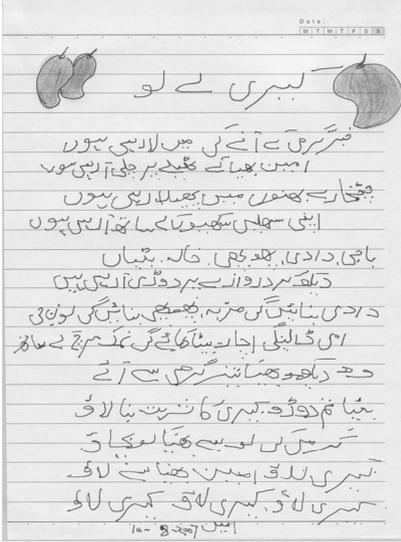
left a blank for those which he could not write. He gave the tape and notebook to Hamida. Hamida listened to the tape and saw the notebook and filled in the blanks (I have a sample). He visited Hamida once or twice a week. Hamida explained the spelling of the words, how they could be broken down and how new words could be formed (word making games). She also recorded the spelling and the break-up of the words on the tape recorder. He listened to the tape again and again and slowly started to learn the words and developed new words from the break-up of the words. Hamida gave him educational cards for word making, which helped a lot in learning new words. He also went into the Urdu Bazaar and bought learning games from there, like Scrabble in Urdu.

**Step 4:** He started writing poems in his own handwriting. His handwriting is good. He showed me his diary of poems on vegetables. There were spelling mistakes from the dictionary point of view, but it is a great achievement for him.

He told me now there were two steps left in his learning cycle. I asked him, "Tell me about these two steps. You can already read and write".

He said, *"In phase 5, I will try to read newspapers and fill in different forms which I have collected. In phase 6, I will open an account in the bank and apply for some loan to buy a shop, because I am getting old and cannot walk the whole day with a heavy cart. Next time when you will come, I will have my own shop and also a shop for my son in a different place."*

Now because Hamida has moved away from this area, he has been having some difficulty with his learning but according to him, Hamida helped him and made him capable of doing it himself.



**Unripe Mango:** This poem is about an unripe mango, which is called "kairi" in Urdu. The handwriting is very clear. In this poem, he explains the importance of kairi juice for in the hot season it mitigates the effects of heat stroke. "Girls love unripe mango. Sisters, mothers, and aunts use it to make pickles and marmalade". He used a green pen and pencil to colour the unripe mango. It is a very rhythmic song and in his area children love to sing it in the mango season.

I talked to my aunt and told her the whole story. Aunty promised that now she will help him and buy suitable books for him. Hira also joined Aunty in this endeavour, and I am sure that Amen will achieve his dreams because he works hard at his learning. He has taught me a big lesson - that literacy practices must be relevant to each learner, and few literacy programmes acknowledge this fundamental fact. Just as Amen created his own learning plan, I wish policy makers and literacy promoters could learn a lesson from Amen and develop literacy programmes according to the needs of the stakeholders. What is needed is acknowledgement and thinking beyond current limits and a new vision of adult literacy. Amen Baba was a lamp lighter for all adult literacy promoters. Lighthouses like Amen are around us. We just need to view them from within. His six step learning plan will always guide

## **Vegetable seller**

me in my future literacy planning. This is a gift from Amen Baba for all of us. Thank you Amen Baba for sharing your simple six points learning programme with us.

**[For Postscript, see Plates VIII and IX]**

## **ZIA OPENS THE TAP OF LITERACY: A PLUMBER PLANS HIS OWN LEARNING**

I met Zia fortuitously during a heavy rain shower.

In Karachi, people experience rain on only a very few occasions. People wish and pray for rainfall, but when it comes, it can bring problems as the whole system usually becomes overstretched. In these circumstances, some people prefer to stay at home, only venturing out if there is an extreme need. On the other hand, others, especially the youngsters, come out on the roads and enjoy themselves. The girls make special food to enjoy the rain and sing songs. Therefore, the rain brings a mixture of problems and happiness.

It was raining cats and dogs. The roads were full of water, and the electricity, as usual in these circumstances, was unavailable. I was sitting on my terrace witnessing the spectacle of cars stuck in the water and an electric wire that had become displaced and dropped in the water. People, on a voluntary basis, were shouting and warning people *"Don't go down this road as there is a strong current in the water."* There was also an emergency, so the ambulance came. I was feeling sorry for those who were stuck on the roads. Then my maid Rajni came with a cup of tea for me and said, *"Bibi, the kitchen-sink pipe is broken and water is flowing on the floor. I tried to mend it but it became worse."* I said, "Oh my God, in this bad weather, how can I find a plumber? Just close the tap and do not use it." She said *"Bibi, please come and see the situation first."* So I went into the kitchen to see the problem. The situation was worse than I had expected. Something had gone wrong with the outside pipe, and rain water from the courtyard was running into the interior of the house. When I saw the situation, I said "Oh my God! Hurry up, pick up the carpets and remove everything from the dining room." To help us, I called my driver Ali. and he said, *I know somebody who lives very close to here and he is a plumber."*

After forty five minutes, Ali came back with a plumber. Ali said *"Luckily I found Zia at home, so I brought him, but he will charge double."* I said "I will pay double." Zia immediately started his work to resolve the situation, soon he located the problem and started to mend it. The rain became very heavy and Zia's job became difficult. He had to go out into the courtyard in the rain and work there in rather unpleasant conditions. He was thoroughly

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soaked. But at last Zia solved the problem and water started going back to the main pipe in the courtyard. I said "Thank you." Ali took him to the servants' quarter and gave him some dry clothes so that he could change out of his wet apparel.

After changing his clothes, he came back to the kitchen to check that the pipe was working as expected. He said, "*It is working alright.*" I said, "Zia Bhai, sit down and have a cup of tea. You are very talented, you solved a difficult problem in just a few minutes. Thank you both for coming in this appalling weather and also for solving the problem." He said, "*Thank you for what I am charging double.*" I said, "Even if you asked for three times more I would pay; to me a double charge is reasonable." He looked at me and said, "*Bibi, you are very different. Women love bargaining and I was thinking you will start bargaining, then I will reduce it by some small amount.*" I said, "You agreed to come in this weather, this is very important for me. Even for triple money, usually people do not come."

Meanwhile Rajni brought tea with samosas for him, me, Ali and herself. While we were having tea, I asked, "Zia, are you educated?" He said, "*No, I have never been to school.*" I said, "*How did you learn plumbing, this is a very skilled job?*" He said "*When I was very little, my father kept me with him all the time. He was a plumber and I learned the job from him. My uncle is also a plumber. He and my father provided their services in some multi-storied residential flats. As I was attached to them, when I was very little I started to solve many small plumbing problems.*" I asked, "Can you read and write?" He said, "*I told you, I have never been to school, so how can I read and write?*" (It would seem that, to him, it is only in school that one can learn to read and write ). I said, "Sorry."

I asked him, "*If you live here in this area, why have I not seen you before?*" He said, "*I lived in Hyderabad until very recently. I came here as a driver in the house from where Ali brought me.*" I said, "Very interesting. When did you learn driving?" He said, "*Seven years ago. In the daytime I drove a taxi for the last six years and in the evening I sat in a shop and provided plumbing services to the flat with my uncle and father.*"

I said, "Do you not feel any problem when people ask you to give them a receipt for the work and cost of the replacement items?" He said, "*No problem; when they ask for a receipt, I give them a receipt, and I write down all the names of the parts which I purchased, their cost and my labour charges.*" I found this very

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interesting. I said, "You said that you cannot read and write, now you are saying that you can read and write." He said, "Bibi, I cannot read your books and I cannot write as you write, but I can write what I need to write."

Then he asked me, "Do you need a receipt?" I said, "Yes, if possible." He took out a notebook from his pocket and asked me whether I wanted the receipt in Urdu or English. It was a day of surprises for me. A person who claimed that he had never been to school and could not read or write was asking me in which language I needed a receipt. I said, "Give me two receipts, one in English and one in Urdu." Now that in turn was a surprise to him. He said, "Bibi, why do you want two separate receipts in two languages?" I said, "I want to see whether you can write in two languages." He did not like my response and said, "Are you setting me an exam? I did not come here to take an exam."

1 پیڑ - 160 روپیہ  
پائپ (چار فٹ) 65 روپیہ  
نٹ بولٹ 20 روپیہ  
مزدوری 150 روپیہ  
کل  
295

Rubber      RS 60  
Pipe (4 feet) 65  
Nut bolt      20  
Labor      150  
Total      295

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*Zia who claims that he is illiterate gave me receipts in two languages. He kept a simple small size notebook in his pocket. If somebody asked for a receipt, he wrote one out in clear, readable handwriting. Why does he think he is illiterate? Why was he led to believe that he is illiterate? A pertinent question for all of us.*

I realised that my response was not sensible. I should not have posed the question in the way I did, and I had made a mistake, but I could not undo my actions. I thought I need to be careful and should not show my feeling of surprise. I said, "Don't get angry, let me explain why I need it." Then I told him briefly that I was in the field of adult literacy, and in a very simple way, what I was doing nowadays. So I also asked him if I could record our conversation, so that I could listen to it later on. He gave permission wholeheartedly, saying "Okay." He gave me two receipts, one in Urdu and one in English

I said, "Why do you say that you are illiterate but you can write in two languages?" He said, with embarrassment, "Because I have never been to school. I can only write the names of those things which I buy and which are involved in my business." I said, "Where did you learn to read and write?" He said, "I learned accidentally. About six or seven years ago, I went in a house to do some plumbing work. I checked the problem and told the lady that a few parts of the flash tank needed to be replaced. I also told her the names of the parts. The lady said 'Can you bring these parts and complete the task?' I said 'Yes, I can do that.' I went to the shop, bought all the required parts and came back to her house. I completed my work and told the lady that the work had been completed and she could check it. She checked it and was very pleased with my work. Then she said, 'Give me the receipt.' I said that I had not brought the receipt, so she said, 'Never mind, you can write it down on a piece of paper.' I said, 'I cannot write. She said, 'Sorry, it is ok.' I do not know, honestly I do not know why and how it slipped from my mouth but I said, 'I want to learn to read and write.' The lady said, 'What is stopping you?' I said nothing, perhaps 'the time.' Meanwhile, her cook Rahim who was there and listening to the whole conversation quietly said, 'If you want, I can teach you.' I accepted his offer. I thought that since God has given me this golden opportunity, I should not miss it. The lady said, 'I will arrange books and copies for you.' I said, 'I will not learn from books.' She was surprised and said, 'Then how will you learn?' I said, 'I will learn from your cook Rahim.' She looked at me and smiled, and said to her cook, 'Now, you have

*promised, so this is between you and him, and if you need any of my help, let me know.' After this, I refused to take my labour charges. But the lady said, 'No, this is your right and this is a business arrangement.' By force, she gave me the labour charges. Then in the evening, I went to see Rahim the cook and spent some time with him. In a period of four months, I learned the basic things and later on, with practice, I was able to read and write."*

He asked why I was asking these questions and what my job involves. Then I explained again what I do, and why I was interested in his story. He said, *"That is good. Bibi, there are good people in the world and in my Pakistan who are very helpful, whenever they see any opportunity they are ready to help others - like Rahim. As soon as my boss in the plumber shop where I worked appreciated that I could read and write, he raised my salary and gave me some extra responsibilities and put me in charge of other plumbers."* He started talking about the kindness of people and about politics. I was interested to know more about his learning style. I said, *"That is good, that you found people who were helpful. Tell me, you refused to learn from basic books, then how did you learn, what was your style?"* He said, *"Bibi, this is very simple and people like you will not be able to understand and will laugh. You spend months and months or rather years and years to learn. I and people like me need some short duration styles which can help us. We do not have years to spend just in learning the few things which we need for our jobs. How can you understand our simple style? I am not educated. Our styles will not work for educated people."*

I was interested to know his style of learning. He was angry and critical of formal schooling and wanted some alternatives for working people like him. I said, "Perhaps you are right, but tell me about your learning style." He said, *"One day I went to Rahim to get my first lesson. Rahim asked me, 'what do you want to learn?' I said, 'I want to read and write the names of all the tools and parts which are used in plumbing."* So Rahim wrote down the names of all the parts which Zia told him. Rahim told Zia that they would meet once a week and they set times and days. Next time when Zia went to see Rahim, they sat near the sea, because Rahim lives in the servants' quarter of a house near the sea. Rahim asked Zia to bring some parts with him, or if he can bring a chart or pictures of the parts, then it would be good. So Zia brought with him a few parts and charts of the parts. Zia said that in the first meeting, Rahim asked Zia to leave the charts and parts

## Plumber

with him, then they started chatting. During the conversation, Zia and Rahim found that they belonged to neighbouring villages and realised that they have several mutual acquaintances. After this they felt very close to each other and felt they had built a new relationship. Zia said, *"We felt that we were like brothers. We decided that we will always meet in the same place near the sea."*

I said, *"What a place to meet. Do you like the sea?"* He said, *"I love the sea, and whenever I have the time I just go there and sit and observe people, happy people. It looks as if there are no problems in Pakistan and the whole country is happy. I feel good."*

Again he was becoming political but I was interested in how he learned. So I said, *"When you went the second time to see Rahim, what did you both do?"* Zia noticed my deep interest in his learning styles. He said, *"Bibi, it is a long story. I know once I tell you how I learned, then you will ask me why I changed my profession and then you will ask me how I got a driving licence, so it is a long story but I will tell you."* I said with a smile, *"Thank you very much for reading my mind."* I thought he is very sharp and intelligent. He said, *"Formally, I went to Rahim's place ten times to get proper lessons and informally I met him many other times."* Suddenly his mobile phone rang, and he received the call. What I heard was roughly as follows:

*Yes, I am speaking.*

*Bibi, it is very rough weather and still it is raining hard and nothing is available. How can I come?*

*I can come tomorrow.*

*Tell me your address.* He took out a small diary from his pocket and wrote down an address.

*I can only come if the weather is better. Yes, if you send your car, I will come.*

I said, *"Zia Bhai, can I see your diary, where you have noted down the address?"* He said *"Bibi, you cannot understand this, I have written it myself."* With a little hesitation, he showed me his diary. I could read very clearly the address which he had noted down. I said, *"You can write very well, why did you say you are Jahil (illiterate)?"* He said, *"I do not have any certificate or paper to show that I am literate, which means I am illiterate. People who are educated like you call me illiterate. Educated people's decision about me perhaps is right, I am illiterate."* I said, *"Illiterates cannot read and write, but you can, so you are literate."* He said *"Bibi, I feel good. I swear on God I am so happy when you say I am literate."* Again I thought, I want to know about his ten-step

learning agenda and he goes back to talking about other issues. I listened to him patiently, not only that, but also to give the impression that I am listening carefully. I knew I was dealing with an intelligent man with sharp observation skills. So I gave him time. Then I asked, "Tell me, what did you do in the ten sittings?" He said:

1<sup>st</sup> sitting: *Rahim showed me five picture cards of plumbing parts. He took these pictures from the charts which I had given him, and asked me the names of these tools. I told him the names and then he showed me one card with the word 'pana' (spanner) written on it and asked me to recognise the look of the word. Then he showed me a picture of 'pana' and once I recognised the word 'pana' in writing, then he showed me five word cards and asked me to pick out the word 'pana' and put it next to the picture of a 'pana'. I did this correctly and I liked the way he was helping me. We were sitting on a bench near the sea. In this way I recognised the names of five plumbing parts. In every sitting, I offered tea and biscuits as a small acknowledgment of his help.*

2<sup>nd</sup> sitting: *He helped me to write down the names of the five parts which I had recognised in the first sitting. Initially I copied the names from the charts and then during the practice, I learned the sound and the alphabets, which are used in the word and the parts (the syllable) of the word. He showed me five more word cards of plumbing tools, I recognised the names of the tools with practice, and then we played games. He held ten cards with pictures of the tools, and I had ten name cards. He put one picture card on the bench and asked me to match the name card with the picture card. Initially I made a few mistakes in recognition of the words. For every mistake, I had to pay for a cup of tea. However, after three or four times I put the correct word with the picture. At home, I practised putting the word card in front of the picture card of the tool. It was my homework to practice ten words and match them with their picture.*

3<sup>rd</sup> sittings: *I learned five more words and practised with a total of ten words. We also played games.*

4<sup>th</sup> sittings: *I learned to write five more words (a total of 15 words). Now I could read and write 15 part names correctly. I also*

## Plumber

*learned the make-up of the words and to make new words from the parts of the words. This was very interesting.*

6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> sittings: *I was able to write 45 to 50 words related to plumbing and was also able to make new words from these fifty words. I was spending hours and hours on my practice, almost all my free time; I liked all this very much.*

8<sup>th</sup> sittings: *He taught me joining words to make a sentence. This was not difficult for me and with conscious effort, I started to write short sentences which were useful in my work.*

9<sup>th</sup> sittings: *I learned to write a receipt.*

10<sup>th</sup> sittings: *We revised everything and I found my own performance satisfactory. I said, 'I think I can now practise on my own. If I feel any difficulty, then I will come to see you. Otherwise thank you very much. God will reward you for this good act. Now I am not handicapped. I can do my job very well. With on-the-job practice, I am able to read and write'.*

It was amazing. I asked, "From where did Rahim the cook learn all these methods?" He said, "I asked him the same question and he told me that he learned them from his Begum Sahiba where he works". He said that his Begum Sahiba gives tuition to children of English-medium schools. When he showed an interest to learn, his Begum Sahiba taught him this way and he taught me. Thanks to him."

Now the rain had stopped and he wanted to go. He asked me if my driver could drop him back home, and I agreed. Speaking in English, I asked Ali to offer him dinner, so he talked to him in the Sindhi language and Zia accepted the invitation saying, "Okay, I will go after dinner." I was surprised he had replied in English. I asked him, "Can you speak English?" He said, "I can speak broken English." I asked him, "From where did you learn English?" He said, "As a driver I worked with an English family and I learned it from them." I said, "You are more accomplished than me, you can speak five languages."

He said, "Bibi, this is the first time somebody has taken an interest in me and is talking about me. I feel good." I said, "Begum Sahiba and Rahim helped you a lot, have you forgotten them?" He

said, "I cannot forget these people. Now Rahim is my spiritual teacher."

I said, "How did you get your driving licence?" He said, "This was a bitter experience. In my area, an NGO opened an adult literacy centre. I thought it is only a matter of three months; I will get a certificate and learn more. So I obtained admission to attend this literacy centre. They started teaching me ABC. I told them that I can write a few words, just teach me some words related to driving. However, the teacher refused and said, 'We will teach according to our programme, not according to your programme.' I found this useless. What they are teaching, I already know. I went there to learn more, not what I already knew, and to get a certificate which will be helpful for me. So I left the centre."

I asked, "Then what did you do to learn to read and write about driving related literacy in order to get your driving licence?"

He said, "I already knew how to drive from my friends, but I needed more literacy skills to get the licence. I went back to Rahim, but unfortunately Rahim had left the job and moved to somewhere else. So I used the same pattern as before, and bought traffic rules charts. I made cards, one set of cards with pictures and one set of cards with names. Then I got help from the customers who came into the plumbing shop, and I found that there are so many people around who can help if you ask them. So with the help of my customers, friends and ordinary people and with my own ability, I learned to write words and sentences related to traffic rules. I went for the driving test, passed and got the licence.

Now I am thinking to teach my brothers in the same way, one is learning driving and one is a cook in somebody's house."

I asked him, "If I can do something, please let me know." Rajni, my cook, came and said, "Ali, dinner is ready", so Ali and Zia went into Ali's room to have dinner. I thanked him for telling me his story of learning. I paid him double money for his work, but he said, "I will not charge extra money because I got respect from this house." I encouraged him to take what had been agreed, but he stubbornly refused to take the extra charge. I asked my driver to drop him after dinner.

Zia had posed serious questions for me. Why did the literacy centre not respect his knowledge? With his knowledge and skills, Zia could be a great resource to assist the teacher. Why is he calling himself illiterate? How far is his claim justified, that people like us gave him this title, which he simply accepted? How can his

## **Plumber**

ten-step-learning-regime be useful for literacy promoters? When will donor agencies, NGOs, international organisations and the government take account of these sleeping volcanoes? When will they develop programmes which utilise existing knowledge like Zia's? When will we stop calling them illiterate? Are they illiterate? – a question to be addressed? Who is illiterate? To me, Zia opened a tap to make literacy more pervasive throughout the society.

***DORMANT VOLCANOES ARE WAITING FOR A SPARK: SHIRIN HELPS HER FAMILY TO LEARN RELIGIOUS LITERACY.***

Hyderabad is my birthplace and the second biggest city of the province of Sindh in Pakistan. For the last twenty years, I have been working in this province with NGOs, the Government and communities. During my service tenure, I travelled ten to fifteen times a month to different cities and villages within Sindh, and worked with almost all the prominent NGOs and CBOs. The NGOs and communities have come to know me very well when working in my field of women's empowerment and community-based education. I strongly believe that a community can take the responsibility to run a successful educational programme, so even when I go on a private trip, it always turns into a business trip.

This happened when I went to collect data on the impact of Learning Resource Centres in Piyaro Lund, a district of Sindh near Hyderabad. When people from the community know that I am in Hyderabad, they usually come to meet me at my hotel, where they talk about their progress and show respect for my work. I always try to accommodate and meet as many people as possible, but on this trip (November 2007) I wanted to concentrate on the objective of my trip which could be lost if there were too many unscheduled distractions. Initially, I thought I should instruct the receptionist that I should not be disturbed, but then I realised that I should not distance myself from the community people, I should respect their feelings and maintain the respect which they have for me and my work. These are the people who have an encyclopaedic knowledge of local literacies and numeracies; these are the people who provide fuel to my insights about adult literacy. These people add power and strength to my belief that communities can think, initiate and sustain their own social development programme.

There follows a case study about a mother Hamida, her daughter Iffat and daughter-in-law Shirin which poses questions for all of us who have the professional authority and responsibility and control the finances for the promotion of adult literacy.

During a visit to Hyderabad city, I returned to my hotel from the field where I had interviewed some women. I saw that three women were sitting on a sofa. One was in her late fifties, another in her late twenties and the third in her early twenties; all were wearing traditional Sindhi glass-embroidered dresses. The younger

## The family

women were also wearing dark make up, red lipstick, and many colourful bangles. From their appearance, I guessed that they belonged to the rural areas of Sindh. They looked at me, smiled, stood up and greeted me. In response, I greeted them, smiled, and went to the reception to get my room key. When they saw that I had not recognised them, they went back to the sofa and sat down. They start talking to each other in Sindhi language (which I understand very well). I overheard them say *"Apa did not recognise us. You go and talk to her"*. Although I overheard this, I was not sure if they were talking about me or someone else. I asked the receptionist for my key, and he indicated that some guests were waiting for me, pointing to the three women on the sofa. Although I had made no appointment with them and they did not know when I would come back to the hotel, they had already found out that I was staying at the City Gate Hotel and knew that I would return in the evening. So they were waiting for me. I went back to them and apologised that I had not recognised them and I had not realised that they had come to meet me. The old woman said, in Urdu *"No Baity, it is not your fault; we heard from somebody and knew you are going back tomorrow, so we just want to meet you."*

I ordered tea and started chatting to them, as I had no specific agenda. (I have used the word 'Amma' in this paper for Hamida.)

Amma said, *"Baity, do you remember us? You came to our village in Thatta, encouraged us to learn to read and write, and encouraged us to send our daughters to school. You opened a CBS there."* When I worked in the Aga Khan Education Service, we initiated a Community-Based School (CBS) programme particularly for girls in rural areas of Sindh and travelled a lot to mobilise and encourage women to send their daughters and female members to school and this is what she was referring to. I still did not recall her, as during mobilisation I met hundreds of women and visited numerous villages in the Thatta districts from whence they came.

Iffat said, *"Apa, do you remember when a mad street dog tried to attack you and you rushed into my house to save yourself but fell in the wet mud."* Suddenly I recalled this family because they were very helpful and Iffat provided me with her new dress as my dress was muddy and badly soiled. I said, *"Thank you very much for helping me in that horrible situation."* We reminisced about this incident when I fell down in the wet mud and on standing up, nobody recognised me. That was a unique experience in my life

## The family

but I will always remember the help which was provided to me by the family.

When I felt that everybody was at ease and they were chatting as if I was their friend who had come back after a long time, I said in Urdu, "Tell me something about CBS."

Amma and Iffat both replied together, "*It is going very well and my younger daughters and all the relatives' children are going to that school. This is our school, so we ourselves manage this school.*" I said, "This is very good and I am pleased to hear it; I know the community can do magic and we can all learn from you." I asked Shirin, "What you are doing here, I thought you lived in Hala?" (a well-known town of the Matayari district and close to Hyderabad). Instead of Shirin, Amma replied, "*Now she is my Bahu [daughter-in-law] and lives with us in Thatta*" (another district of Sindh).

Shirin is a literacy graduate under the ESRA/USAID programme and also attended the Family Reading Programme, (FRP) before marriage. I held Shirin's hand and changed my position a little bit towards Shirin so that instead of Amma, Shirin should reply. "Did you initiate FRP in your new home?" In spite of making conscious efforts to encourage Shirin to respond, I was not successful. (I know that particularly in rural cultures, if an elderly person is present, she or he will take the lead to respond; if a younger person speaks up in the presence of an elder, it is considered very impolite).

Again, Amma replied with pleasure, "*God keep her happy and keep me alive to see her sons.*" (She did not mention daughters, as she only wanted grandsons). Shirin smiled. I was trying to encourage both Iffat and Shirin to take part in the conversation. I asked Iffat, "What are you doing nowadays? Did you take admission in the Adult Literacy Centre which opened in your area?" Iffat said, "*Amma and I took admission there and completed a three months' course. After completing the three months' course, I was not able to read even children's storybooks and not able to write. The course was very boring and the teacher treated us like very small children. She even treated Amma as a child, which Amma did not like, but nevertheless we completed the course but at the end were not able to read and write the simplest sentences.*"

I said, "What did the teacher do which Amma did not like?" Amma said, "*Baity, one day, I did not go to the centre and the next day when I went to the class, I asked Rahima, another*

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*literacy centre learner, what happened in my absence. The teacher who was like a Baity [young girl] to me said with anger, 'Do not talk in class and open your book at page nine'. I did not like this behaviour at all, I wanted to get out but Iffat stopped me from leaving the centre."*

*Iffat continued her conversation and said, "When Shirin came into our house, she started what she called FRP and she sat with me and Amma. With everyone's co-operation, she developed a teaching programme for me and Amma, and now I can read and write religious songs in Urdu and Sindhi in a much better way. That is what I wanted to do - learn to read and write so I will not be dependent on others to help me in learning the religious songs by heart."*

*Suddenly Amma said, "Why do you people give us false hopes and show us Sabz Bag [Urdu idiom symbolising giving 'false hopes'] during the mobilisation?"*

*I asked "What Sabz Bag was shown to you and who showed them to you?" Amma said, "Those NGO people, they came many times and said again and again, 'Because you are illiterate, people can cheat you easily'." Iffat added, "The NGO mobiliser said, 'Once you are literate, you can get a job and life will change'." Amma said, "Because I was cheated many times, I believed that people were treating me as a fool and cheated me because I was illiterate. So for me this was a real charm, a promise that once I become literate, I will not be cheated."*

*Amma gradually was becoming aggressive and Iffat showed her deep pain and anger on the subject of the false raising of hopes. I had no idea to whom she was referring, perhaps it was some NGO who had implemented the literacy programme in their village. Shirin asked, "Apa, don't you think they cheated us by giving us false hopes. They played with us, knowing that we are illiterate and can be fooled easily." I felt very embarrassed and ashamed and was having some difficulty in answering the questions of Amma and Iffat. When they realised that I was having difficulty to respond to their questions, Iffat changed the topic. Iffat said, "Now I can read and write with the help of Shirin and Amma can read but cannot write."*

*Amma somehow came back to the cheating topic and said, "Last week, I went to a fabric shop and after bargaining I asked the shopkeeper to give me five metres of fabric. I watched him measuring five metres, then I turned to talk to my daughter. I paid the cost for five metres of fabric and took it home. The next day, I*

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*brought out the piece of fabric to make a shirt and shalwar (trouser) of Iffat's size. However, I was having difficulty in making the full dress, and then I measured the fabric with my tape. It was only four and a half metres instead of five. Now I am literate, but I was still cheated."*

Shirin said, "Amma, do you remember the Rs 50 note?" Amma became emotional and said, "One day, I went to buy some fruit in the evening, even though I have a vision problem. I bought some fruit and gave the shopkeeper a hundred rupees note and asked him to return Rs 55. The clever man gave me a Rs 50 counterfeit note; without checking, I just put it in my purse. The next day, I brought out this note from my purse and gave it to my son to buy some groceries. He saw the note and pointed out straight away that it was a false note. I got so upset, went back to the fruit seller, and told him that he had given me a fake note. He refused to accept this and of course, I had no proof that he gave me this note."

What Amma and Iffat were saying made a lot of sense to me. Even though both Iffat and Amma were literate, they were still being cheated, so there is no link between being literate and not being cheated. Both literates and non-literates can be cheated. What is needed is wisdom, awareness and a keen sense of judgement when dealing with money or dealing with people. I was trying to change the topic but Amma was annoyed that she was cheated even when she was literate, and kept returning to this topic and venting her anger as though I was in some way responsible for this state of affairs. Somehow, I bore some responsibility as a promoter of literacy and female education. Perhaps it is true that people like me should take some responsibility.

Amma said, "Yes Baity, before when we were cheated, we did not get upset because we were illiterate; but being a literate, if we get cheated we feel pain, as we believed that once we become literate, the magic will happen and nobody can cheat us."

Most of the time Amma was talking and Shirin and Iffat were silent supporters. When I realised that the whole conversation had returned to the topic of 'only illiterates can be cheated', I tried to change the topic by asking Amma, "You said you did not learn from the literacy centres and then you said the whole family can read and write because of Shirin's help. What was different between Shirin's teaching and literacy centre teaching? Shirin is not a trained teacher."

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Amma said, *"Before her marriage, I knew she had initiated some programme (she was referring to the Family Reading Programme which Shirin told me about). As it is my brother's house, I visited her house many times. I wanted something like this in my house only, for my family and neighbours. Shirin came into my house after her marriage. After a few weeks, I said to Shirin, 'You learned reading and writing and we did not although we both attended the Literacy Centre. Now you can teach us and our neighbours.'"* (Note the language: Amma did not request Shirin to do them a favour; rather Shirin was ordered to teach them without any option! This was possible because Shirin is the daughter-in-law and Amma is the decision maker in the household).

I asked Shirin, "How did you teach them?" Shirin said, *"Our Literacy Centre's teaching was different, of long duration and then we had FRP. One day I, Iffat and Amma all sat together and we discussed what they wanted to learn. Iffat and Amma both can read the Quran. I used a simple technique, I selected words from the Quran which I asked them to read. They read these words, and then I wrote the same words in Urdu and Sindhi and encouraged them to read in Urdu. Initially they said they could not read the words but gradually they started reading without any difficulty. Similarly, I developed some games using the names of vegetables, fruits, food and many things which we use at home and everyone knows them. I used wrapping papers, film titles, fabric names, forms and anything that was readily available in our home. From my own experience, I know that persons who can read the Quran can read Urdu and Sindhi with understanding, so I used the same with them."*

I personally believe that Shirin's experience has lot of merit. My own experience with hundreds of learners is that people who can read the Quran without understanding can (if helped) learn to read Urdu or Sindh more easily and with understanding.

When Shirin was telling me about her teaching programme for Iffat and Amma, Amma wanted to intervene and was becoming very excited. She opened her mouth many times to say something, but she could not say anything because my full attention was on Shirin. As soon as Shirin had finished, Amma quickly said, *"The best thing that Shirin did, and God will give her a reward for this act, she taught us God's 99 names. Now we can recognise all 99 names of God. We also learned by heart 100 names of Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him)."* Iffat added, *"Shirin never taught us in the same way as the literacy centre*

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*teacher taught us. She used what she called 'learning through conversation' and games."* (in Urdu, *Batoon mai Seekhna and Khail main seekhna*).

I asked Shirin, "How did you teach them? Did you have some sort of programme or guideline to follow in your teaching?" She said, "*I did not do anything special. When I was a participant in the FRP programme, one of our major assignments was to select a buddy [friend] and teach them to read and write. My aunty was my buddy and I tried to teach her. She was interested and committed but somehow she did not show the progress which we both were hoping for. Then I had a discussion with my coordinator about why my programme was failing because my buddy was not able to read and write in a satisfactory manner.*"

I intervened, "What do you mean by a 'satisfactory manner'?" She said, "*She was able to write names of groceries and articles which are found at home, but not able to read from TV and not able to write complete sentences. However, she learned all the poems and showed great interest in the activities related to religion - like Quranic phrases and religious poems. I was very disappointed and both my aunty and I were depressed. I was embarrassed also, that aunty was not able to read and write. I sat with my coordinator and with my aunty. We discussed everything and my aunty helped us a lot in identifying problems, which according to her were the learning difficulties. For example: writing text with very difficult words; we are Sindhi speakers, yet I was teaching in Urdu; she was interested in quick learning and I was using a primer-based approach; she wanted to learn to read Hamd and Naat [songs in the praise of God and the Last Prophet] because she has a good voice and attends many religious ceremonies like Milad [Milad is a religious gathering where those who have a good voice sing poems and Quranic phrases and others follow them or listen. It is like a choral song]. With the help of my coordinator, I developed a religious-based learning programme for her using games, religious stories, discussions and song techniques. But unfortunately I was not able to implement this new method called 'Tariqa' in Urdu with my buddy as I got married and moved from Hyderabad to Thatta.*"

I asked her, "Shirin, what happened to your buddy, did you leave her in-between?" She said, "*In a way, yes. I no longer live in Hyderabad and providing help from here is difficult. But the last time I went to spend a few weeks with my mother, Aunty (my buddy) came and told me that she is getting help from her*

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*husband and her children and now she is able to read Hamd and Naat. I offered her my help while I was staying at my mother's house. She had already made good progress in reading but was having difficulty in writing. Therefore, I helped her in writing skills using God's and Prophet Mohammed's names and developed a few games on religious stories. This helped a lot. I was so happy when she wrote a letter for me in her writing in Sindhi. Now she can also fill in forms which I witnessed when her son brought her the form for a national identity card."*

I said to Shirin, "That was good, but I think we were talking about Iffat and Mama's progress. What techniques did you use to teach them to read and write?" She said, "I know my in-laws are also very interested in religious-based learning, every member of the family offers prayers five times a day and reads the Holy Quran regularly. As I told you, my belief is that those who can read the Holy Quran can read Urdu or Sindhi easily. Therefore, the method which I developed for my aunty, I applied here and it proved successful. I used methods like religious-based words through games, songs, discussions, and stories (religious, films, local). The most interesting activity for me was when we discussed with Amma and Iffat if we wanted to bring changes to our home, what would it be and who will do it? These are very simple methods, not sophisticated like educated and urban people use; we have limited money". **[See Plate X: Reading Corner]**

Amma said, "I am lucky, I have Buhu like Shirin. Now I am able to read religious stories slowly in my own way, leaving difficult words but nevertheless getting the meaning of the sentence." Iffat intervened and said, "Apa, I am able to write the recipes of new dishes which come on TV cooking programmes and also personal grooming techniques". She took out a notebook from her bag and showed it to me. I observed clear, readable, large handwriting although according to the dictionary there were a few mistakes, particularly in the use of letters which have similar sounds. The recipes were written in both Urdu and Sindhi. "Now I will stay in Hyderabad to get training as a beautician and also learn to apply henna on the hands. So I will be able to open a beauty parlour in my home in Thatta." Shirin said, "Nowadays, Amma tells us stories from her time and how to prepare treatments from local herbs. I am writing down all these things in our family book. The next time I see you, I will show you." I said, "I would be glad to see this book."

## The family

After this, Shirin invited me to her home in Thatta. I said "*In-sha-allah.*" They left me with so many questions to ponder. Can a field mobiliser appreciate Amma's concern about raising false hopes in regard to literacy being able to inoculate the literacy learners against cheating? Can Shirin's simple needs and interest-based literacy approach be a better solution for increasing adult literacy? Is Shirin's literacy learning approach as simple or as effective as she indicated? Can policy makers come down from their ivory towers and look at the literacy teaching style of Shirin and also others who are all around us? They show their presence by using literacies all the time; perhaps literacy promoters should be more tuned in to these alternative styles. There is much to be learned from these very practical practitioners who have had to develop innovative approaches to suit local and individual circumstances. They have had to generate techniques which meet with the needs and approval of learners rather than just making minor changes to programmes used for decades for children. Policy makers need to change their glasses, get a new hearing aid and activate their dead feelings. Only then will they be able to see, hear and motivate themselves to bring changes to our very rigid and closed approach towards adult literacy.

There are many dormant volcanoes like Shirin who if used in a proper manner perhaps may activate and bring real change which has been overdue for decades. A traditional, rigid approach leading to a test and a certificate perhaps is not the solution for Education for All. A more flexible approach based on what the learners want to read and write for themselves may be more effective.

## Bangle seller

### **SAJID, THE GLASS BANGLE SELLER, RUNS RINGS ROUND MENTAL ARITHMETIC.**

Glass bangles are part and parcel of the Indo-Pakistani culture, they are also colloquially called 'married women's jewellery'. On happy occasions, women and girls of all ages like to wear bangles which complement their dress. Since my schooldays, every time that I went to buy glass bangles, I liked to spend time in the shops listening to the conversation between bangle salesmen, their helpers and the owner of the shop. These conversations are intriguing, because they are largely unintelligible even to the native speaker. The conversations usually take place in Urdu, which is my mother tongue, but they use a great many technical words relating to the glass bangle selling industry, which I have not found in any Urdu dictionary.

Ahtiram has been a bangle seller in Karachi to my extended family for years and his whole family is associated with the glass bangle industry. Some time ago, I asked him, "Where did these words come from?" He said "*Bibi, these words are a mixture of many words and numbers and our forefathers who were not educated created similar words and passed them on to the new generation in the glass bangles factories and glass bangles shops. These words travelled from place to place and generation to generation and changed their form with additions or subtraction of letters. Nowadays, these words are in a wholesale process of replacement by new words which are easier to understand, even for educated people*".

In a glass bangle shop, there is usually an owner, two, three or more salesmen and their helpers, sometimes called Chhotu or Chhotey. This word is used in a social context in many ways, such as 'apprentices' who are learning practical skills on a small honorarium from an early age, and also in the sense of 'helpers'. They can also be seen in retail shops, petrol stations and garages, tailors' shops etc.

During a recent visit to Hyderabad in November, I decided to buy some glass bangles. Hyderabad is very famous for its glass bangles, with factories making bangles and a big market devoted to the sale of bangles. In Hyderabad, I went to the 'Resham Gali', a famous shopping area, to buy bangles, keeping the overall agenda in my mind that I should collect samples of social literacies

and numeracies from this place, as I had been interested in this subject for a long time.

I went to one glass bangle shop without buying anything, as a deal was not agreed, but fortunately, I collected some interesting information. I observed, while I was sitting in the shop, that the shopkeeper was giving instructions in Urdu but using some very strange words, which I could hardly understand to his assistant, a small child aged between ten to twelve years old.

I asked the shopkeeper to show me a certain kind of bangle which I wanted to buy. He gave instruction using technical glass-bangles-selling-industry language, which I found very confusing. He said, "*Chhotey, run and bring Adh Paoi Do<sup>1</sup> from Do Bata Teen (2/3), 3/6 and 1/5.*" He also showed two upright fingers. When I asked, "What does this mean?" He said, "*Medium size, Kashish*" (a character in an Indian TV drama and also very popular in Pakistan, especially among middle-class women and housewives). Chhotey quickly went inside the store and emerged with the three boxes, which he had been asked to bring. I noted down the words and finger positions in my notebook before leaving the shop.

Then I went to a second shop. It was a big shop with hundreds of different kinds, colours and sizes of bangles in the glass display cabinets. They were lit by more than 30 high-powered bulbs, so the ambiance was bright and exciting, with multi-coloured glass bangles and display glass panels reflecting and spreading the light. The owner of the shop was sitting on a high chair behind a glass cabinet and supervising the shop. His three salesmen were attending shoppers and two young boys were assisting the salesmen and bringing bangles from the stores. In both shops, all the shoppers were female. In this shop, again they were giving instructions in the same sort language which I noticed in the first shop. A lady pointed to some particular bangles which were in a glass cabinet, and asked the salesman, "*Show me these bangles in a pink colour.*"

The salesman asked "*What size?*" She said, "*For my little daughter, who is one year old.*" The salesman called to his assistant, "*Chhotey, run and bring Aath Anee* (eight anee represents a very small size of bangles) and he showed two fingers and continued "*from 8/4, 8/9 and 8/11 from Katta.*" (I had no idea of the meaning of 'Katta', but I thought, 'I will check this in the Urdu dictionary'). I noted down all these numbers and words from

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<sup>1</sup> A type of bangle: see list at end of this field narrative

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the two bangle shops and thought, 'I will ask Ahtiram in Karachi what all these words mean'.

Meanwhile, I asked my salesman to show me some particular bangles which were in the cabinet. He asked me, "*What size?*" I had no idea what 'size' here meant. I said, "I need them for myself" and pointed to two sets of bangles which were on display in the cabinets. He instructed one of his assistants, "*Chhotey, Sawa do Inch (2¼) from Tora char (4), chheh (6), aath (8).*" This did not make any sense to me but I had heard one new word 'Tora' (the word 'tora' normally refers to a thick anklet, which has small *ghungroes* (bells) on it. They are used by classical dancers in India and Pakistan, but this meaning was not appropriate in this context, so I just noted down the word). The young assistant quickly rushed back to the store and brought the required bangles for me.

I wanted to talk to the owner of the shop to get answers to the questions which had been at the back of my mind for a long time about the job language and how they transferred this language to other employees. Do all employees come from the same background, so they already know the technical language of the glass bangles sellers? However, I could not get a chance to talk to the owner of the shop. I selected three sets of bangles and after bargaining, I agreed to pay Rs 120 for three dozen bangles. Then I asked for a receipt, and he looked at me very strangely and said, "*We are not educated and do not give receipts and we do not have time to write receipts.*" (I found out later that in ordinary glass bangle shops, there is no culture to give receipts and women rarely ask for receipts. Perhaps that was the reason why the women who were around me were looking at me as though my behaviour was something different from the norm. Later on, I realised that I could not recall any other time in the past when I had asked for a receipt).

I said, "No problem, can you write it down on a piece of paper?" He said, "*I told you, I am not educated, so how can I write it down? If you need a receipt, you could go to another shop.*" Although he said this in an ordinary tone, nevertheless I felt embarrassed that perhaps my request is beyond his usual procedures. But I thought, 'Let me try once more'.

I said, "I like these bangles and if I go to another shop, as you advise, perhaps I could not get this type of bangles from there. I also need a receipt, even a rough one, to keep a record of my shopping. So, if you can give me the information, then I will write

## Bangle seller

it down myself." He looked at me and said, "Bibi, I told you, I never give a receipt; you do not look as if you come from here, that is why you are asking for a receipt. Give me your piece of paper, I will write it for you" and he wrote a rough receipt for me.

1	بند بنگلہ	25/-	250
3	بند بنگلہ	25/-	750
4	بند بنگلہ	10/-	400
2	بند بنگلہ	20/-	400
-1	بند بنگلہ	80/-	800
			2600

Sajid took back the receipt which he gave me initially and wrote this receipt at the end of our conversation. I bought a few more sets of bangles just because he gave me his valuable time during his peak business hours. At my request, he gave me a comprehensive receipt, which shows cost, quantity, name of the bangles and the size. He said that his writing had matured, after many years of practice his handwriting had become better.

I thought it is very interesting, a man who few seconds before had denied that he could read and write, yet he has given me a receipt in his own handwriting without realising that his statement and his actions are contradictory.

I said, "Thank you very much and I am sorry that I took up your business time. It is strange, your handwriting is quite good, you can read and write. Then why did you say you cannot read and write?" He said, "Bibi, I did not see the inside of a school. So people regard me as illiterate. I come from a very poor background where I was brought up to help my father from the age of six or seven." I said, "Please, never call yourself illiterate."

Now I thought that I have created a space, so I can try one more question to see his response. I said, "Are you from Firozabad or Agra?" He immediately said, "How do you know?" I said, "From your language. My family came from Agra and

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relatives live in Firozabad." Then I mentioned some people and area names in these cities. His attitude towards me changed immediately, and he said "*Bibi, sit down.*" He called, "*Chhotey, run and bring two cold drinks, one for me and one for my friend who is with me.*"

I demurred, but he gently insisted. Now I asked his name. He told me that his name was Sajid. Luckily, there were other salesmen who were dealing with all the customers, so no customer was waiting for his attention. I thought, 'Sajid is giving me time and respect; I should buy some more sets of bangles'. So I said, "Please show me some bangles for six or seven years old girls." Sajid said, "*Bibi, I will show you the best bangles.*" He said, "*Chhotey, go and bring Barah (12) Anni from Katta Tulse 4/8, 3/5 and 3/8*" (Tulse is a character from Indian TV dramas and is very famous, particularly amongst housewives).

Whilst talking to him, I also noted the language which the other salesmen were using. I noticed one of the other salesmen in the shop was giving instruction to a helper. He said, "*Chhotey quickly bring Chhay anni (number 6) from 3/7, 5/8 and 4/9 from Ganda*" (no meaning for me). Within three minutes, the helper brought some small sizes of bangles for 6, 7 years old girls. I also heard words of instruction from the salesmen to the helpers during my stay in the shop, like "*Chodha Aani, char anni, Sawa do inch, Derh paai do*" (14 anni and 4 anni are the sizes of the bangles). (An explanation is given at the end of this case study).

I said to Sajid, "I am fascinated by your language, but I do not understand it. I am very interested in your shop language, can I talk to the owner?" Sajid was rather reluctant to grant my request and said, "*I am the owner of the shop.*" I said, "This is good" (Sajid is a middle-aged man, wearing a clean white shirt and a white shalwar; but from his behaviour and working style, he looked like one of the salesmen, and also he was on the counter where salesmen deal with shoppers). I said, "I thought, Baba who is sitting behind the glass screen is in charge." Sajid said, "*Yeh meray walid hain*" (He is my father). I said, "I like the instructions which you gave to your assistant using very slang technical words which have no meaning for others."

He asked about my job and why I was interested in the glass-bangles-shops selling language. I tried to explain but I was not too sure how successful I had been. Sajid said again, "*I have never seen the inside of a school, and never understand people like you who are highly educated and what they are talking about.*" I said,

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"Sajid Bhai, why are you so unhappy with educated people?" He said very strongly, *"No, not all, not with all educated people. I sit in my shop and deal with all kinds of people, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, and all ages of people. But I do hate girls from the English medium and what they think about us."* I said, "How do you know what they think about you?" He said, *"On a number of occasions, I noticed that fashionable girls come into my shop and talk to each other in a derogatory fashion about us, about our profession and about the language which we use in our shop."*

I commiserated with him and said, "I agree".

Then I said, "Sajid Bhai, why do you not encourage these two assistants to go to school? They are small and they should be in school." He laughed and looked at me as though I had said something very funny. Then he said, *"These two lads who are assisting the salesmen are my son and my nephew. Here they are learning their own family business. I sent them to school for four years and they did not learn anything noticeable, except bad habits. They learned nothing which can help them in the family business, not even simple mathematics."* I said, "Perhaps it was too early to judge whether they had learned anything positive? I am sure they learned many things, but maybe not related to your family business?"

He said, *"Perhaps you are right. But in four years, they did not even learn proper reading and writing. Not only that, they started devaluing their own family business and refused to give me a hand after school. They said, 'We will not work in the shop because our class fellows do not give us respect and call us 'Choori Walay' (people who sell bangles)'. Four years of schooling harmed them in so many ways rather than benefited them. If they had spent these four years in the shop, then they would have learned a lot. I wasted money and also their time."*

This was the sort of statement and observation that I had heard so many times before during my community mobilisation period. Sajid said, *"They could not do proper addition and multiplication. Now they learn by assisting me. They are learning mathematics by using it all the time. I teach them maths which is useful for them and for their daily life. They had no idea of profit and loss, even though they were in school for five years. They learned this in three months with me, and proved to themselves that they are better than me in mental maths. Here I ask them practical questions, here they give answers which we apply directly. They*

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*can use a calculator better than me. They are reading and writing better than me.” I said, “What can they read and write which you think is better than you can do?” He said, “They read all the bangle records better than me; they can send messages in Urdu on their mobile phones; they can send messages in English (he meant messages in Roman script), and they can also use a calculator better than me.”*

*Sajid continued and said, “I wanted to open a branch in Karachi and another one in Hyderabad. So I thought I would hire an educated person who will train my sons and salesmen to improve our record keeping and teach us to use a computer. I hired a man to computerise our system and requested him first to try and understand our current system and language. I asked him to spend some time with us so that he could understand our culture and language before developing any programmes. But after spending only half an hour with me and without talking to the others, he thought he understood everything in that first meeting. He went away and developed a system, which involved changing the names of the sizes and also the names of the different kinds of bangles. My salesmen and my sons tried to explain to him that this was an important part of the way we worked, but he said, ‘This is a rough language, we need to change everything’. My salesmen and sons became confused, the whole shop became a big mess and nobody accepted these changes to the system. Our language is built into the glass bangles industry and cannot be separated from it. So he had spoiled the management of the shop, and I had to close the shop for three days. We all sat down together and returned the shop back to its original mode of operation.*

*I decided to go to somebody else. I discussed my problem with an owner of a glass factory and he was kind enough to promise that he would arrange for someone to help me and who could train my sons in bangle shop management, using the same language and also computerise the whole operation. I was involved throughout the process, making sure that the computer was using the correct terms in Urdu. This man developed a very simple programme on the computer and also created a manual. My sons are picking up this system very fast and also the salesmen and I are taking an interest in it.”*

*I said, “Sajid Bhai, from where did you learn writing and reading your own language and the terms which you use?” He said, “I have been involved in this business since I was very small. Most of my family members are in the same business, so I have been using*

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*this language from my early days, and I learned to read and write from my Molve Sahib* (a person who teaches the Quran to children. He is a mobile teacher, going from door to door and teaching children in different families).

I said, "Actually, you have a very interesting story, but I cannot take any more of your time as there are other customers in the shop." He said, "*No problem at all. The salesmen will handle the customers, now you are my special guest, you are from my area.*" I said, "Thank you very much."

I thought, 'Now a golden opportunity has arisen, we have built a good rapport and now I can talk to him in a relaxed manner'. I said, "I know you can read and write, tell me how you keep records of your money." Sajid said, "*I am quite good in oral maths (he meant mental maths) and I keep a record in my notebook. One day a week, Munshi (a person who helps the shopkeeper to keep a proper record for tax purposes) transfers my notebook records into the proper register.*" On my request, he showed me his register. The register had eight columns; four columns were for expenditure which he fills in when he buys bangles, and four columns were for income per day, as follows:

Expenditure

Month ----- Week-----Date-----

Kind	Size	Quantity	Amount

Daily Income Record			
Month -----Week-----Date			
Kind	Size	Quantity	Amount

Every Friday, Sajid checks his expenses and calculates his profit or loss.

I said, "It is very good, simple and workable. Tell me one thing. You hardly have any losses, because you buy 24 bangles to the

## Bangle seller

dozen<sup>2</sup> and sell 12 bangles to the dozen. I know while you are selling bangles to women, girls or babies, a few bangles might break, but even so, it is unlikely that fifty percent of the bangles will break." Instead of answering me, he said, "*I must appreciate your knowledge about the glass bangle business.*" I said, "Thank you, I just picked up this information from bangle shops."

Sajid avoided answering my question, so I thought it better not to push him.

I said, "Sajid Bhai, how do you calculate your daily income?" He said, "*First, I count the money for the whole day's income which I match with the daily income register. After that, I estimate the profit or loss in my head and then check the figures with a calculator. If both give the same answer, then I am satisfied, but if the answers are not the same then I check it again on the calculator. I think it is easier to make a mistake on the calculator than in my head. I have more faith in my oral maths, unlike my children who have more faith in the calculator.*"

I appreciated Sajid's simple recording system and said, "Very impressive. How did you learn the use of a calculator, as you said you have never been to school?" He said, "*I learned from friends.*" I further asked, "How did you learn reading and writing?" He said, "*From Molve Sahib. My father requested Molve Sahib, after giving us a lesson in the Quran, that he should also teach us maths. But he never used paper or pen. He spoke the sums out loud, and encouraged us to give the answers orally and do the working out in our heads. When the answer was correct, he would give us ravri (a kind of local sweet). My father would do the same and I practised mental arithmetic on the job. My father taught me the Urdu which we use in the bangle factories. In my father's time, munshi (the clerk) came to the shop for three days to maintain the returns for tax purposes, and I learned Urdu from him. I did not learn from only one person but from many people. Oh I forgot, I think I sharpened my maths skills with the help of my mother (God give her a place in heaven). She wanted us to go to school but because of poverty, I was not able to go to school, so she did whatever she could to help us learn as many things as possible. She was extremely good at riddles and puzzles, and very creative with riddles. We lived in a joint family system, so after dinner,*

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<sup>2</sup> Bangles are bought in units called *darjen* (dozen). Purchases of bangles from the factories contain 24 bangles to the dozen; sales are in twelve to the dozen.

*about ten children sat with mother and she asked us all riddles. They were mostly maths riddles and puzzles based on bangles marketing, because she worked on polishing bangles at home and knows the terminology used in bangles manufacturing and marketing. That was a fun time, but now I realise that without knowing it or going to school, we learned a lot at home with my mother. I am not educated or literate but do not depend on others (I noted that he was reaffirming that he is illiterate). I can keep and maintain records myself. I have hired a tutor to come to my home. He comes twice a week and teaches my children and nephews how to use the computer."*

I said, "So you learned from many people. This is very good and also that you are acknowledging them." He said, "*I have no belief in paper qualifications. My children are learning those things which are useful for their business lives. Take my example, I have never been to school but I learned reading and writing (now acknowledging that he can read and write) and the maths which are necessary for my job, without knowing that I am learning."* I said, "Are you against education?" He said very forcefully, "*No, not at all, but I am very frustrated with the type of education and the attitudes that formal school is creating. I need useful education for my children which I am trying to provide through home teaching and through learning practical skills on the job. Why can't school do this?"*

I said, "Thank you very much for your time, and also for helping me to understand your shop language." He said, "*Any time you can come to visit me in my shop."* I paid the amount which he took after some hesitation. As I left, I was introduced to his father who was sitting in a small room behind a glass screen supervising the shop.

I was still not sure whether or not I had learned the meaning of the phrases which they were using, and I had noted down from the two shops. When I started writing about Sajid here in the UK, I felt very uncomfortable about whether or not I had truly grasped the communications of the glass bangle sellers, so I phoned Ahtiram (the friend of my family who I mentioned above) from England and rechecked the meanings and explanations with him. Later, during my last visit to Karachi, I phoned Ahtiram again and explained my purpose and told him about the information which I had collected. We agreed to meet on a Friday, so I went to his shop with one of my nephews, intent on learning the meaning of the phrases which are given below. I have tried to develop the following table to help

## Bangle seller

the reader grasp the meaning of the language which I noted at the glass bangle sellers' shops.

The styles of the bangles are usually named after a well-known, popular character from films or TV, particularly Indian film and TV dramas. Nowadays the choice seems to be from characters that appear on popular Indian TV dramas. Even in the bangle seller market, the use of a 'designer name' has crept in, and I noted the use of the words 'Kashish' and 'Tulsi' as a marketing device, perhaps to attract the customers. [See Plate XI]

### Terminology for numbers of bangles

S.No	Terminology used in bangle shops	Explanation / comments
1	One dozen	Bangle sellers sell 12 bangles per dozen. They purchase 24 bangles per dozen.
2	Ganda	4 bangles = one ganda. Bangle sellers sell 3 ganda = one dozen They purchase 6 ganda = one dozen
3	Katta	Katta=Half of tora =136 bangles
4	Tora	68 gandas=272 bangles

### Terminology for size of bangles

S.No	Symbols	terminology	meaning	Suitable for
1	1	Char anni	Size 4	Child - 1 month
2	1=	Chhay anni	Size 6	Child - 6 month
3	11	Aath anni	Size 8	Child < 1 year
4	11=	Das Anni	Size 10	Child 3 - 6 yr
5	111	Barah Aani	Size 12	Child 6 - 7 yr
6	111=	Chodha Aani	Size 14	Child 8 - 10 yr
7	2	2 inch	Size 2"	Girls
8	2=	Adh paai do	Size Medium	Elder girls + Women
9	21	Sawa do inch	Size 2¼"	Women
10	21=	Derh paai do	Size 2½"	Not mentioned
11	21x	Chor size	Special size between 2¼" and 2½"	Large women

*Location and styles of bangles*

The bangles are arranged in boxes, in rows by style within size.



*In the store and even in the cabinet, bangles are arranged in sizes (symbols indicate sizes), design, and colour. Compare the symbols on the boxes with the table above.*

*Instructions to Chhotey/Salesmen*

Chhotey is given instructions on how many, of which size, type and location in the store, of the bangles are required by the salesman. The instructions are both verbal and visual, the latter consisting of displays of a number of fingers in different orientations.

*Example:*

"Adh Paoi Do Tulsi from 2/3, 3/6 and 1/5."

Translation: From medium size, Tulsi category, row 3, box 2; row 6, box 3; and row 5, box 1.

*Example:*

"Aath Anai 8/4, 8/9 and 8/11 from Katta."

Translation: From Size 8, Katta category, row 4, box 8; row 9, box 8; and row 11, box 8.

*Layout of the stores*

Shopkeepers organise their stores according to the physical dimensions of their premises but the organisation of the distribution of the bangles, because of the common reference terminology, tends to be very similar. Only a few of the stores have a labelling system, yet all employees from the assistants to

## **Bangle seller**

the owner, invariably know exactly where to lay their hands on the desired bangles. Sheer usage and routine make redundant the sort of highly specified labelling system that would be encountered in the equivalent store in a developed country. **[See Plate XII]**

This case study raises some interesting questions which go to the heart of our educational systems. Why is it that a bangle seller can organise what he feels to be a more appropriate education for his son than the education policy maker who has spent so many years in higher education supposedly honing his/her academic skills to meet these demands? The highly educated policy maker regards the bangle seller as 'illiterate', yet is beaten hands down in terms of end results and vision. Moreover, the bangle seller, in a very articulate way, expresses his frustration at what those who look down their noses at him try to impose on him and his children.

Perhaps Sajid is a torch bearer, but is he surrounded by people whose eyesight has been interfered with by adopting a particular way of looking at things, and now they are unable to see the light?

## **PART III**

### **LEARNING LESSONS**

#### *Lessons to be learned, challenges to be faced*

The case studies above have been included because they are to us 'telling case studies' of local literacy and numeracy practices. Several of those whose histories have been written here have been defined by their society (and they define themselves) as 'illiterate', and they engage in some form of literacy and numeracy activities in their own way. Others have learned literacy and numeracy skills through non-formal programmes and have built on these.

We are far from wishing to indicate that these are in any way typical accounts. Rather they serve as cases of particular issues that, we suggest, are significant for both policy and practice. The key element we gained from them was in the form of challenges to many of our own assumptions about so-called 'illiterate' people.

We have discussed these case studies among ourselves and come to focus on two main issues – literacy and learning. But each person who reads these case studies will see in them different things, other challenges to their assumptions, other issues which relate to their concerns of the moment.

We think that these case studies are eye-openers, for policy makers to implementers. These people and their activities are around us all the time and yet we largely ignore them. We can see that they are involved in reading and writing practices. We asked them many times to write this, read this, show the receipt or write a receipt for us, and yet we put them in an 'illiterate' category. Why we do that? This is a question which must be addressed. These case studies indicate a different aspect of effective learning and particularly adult learning. Perhaps we have to make efforts to learn from them now.

### **LITERACY AND NUMERACY PRACTICES**

All of those whose histories have been written briefly here, even those who insist strongly that they are 'illiterate', engage in literacy and/or numeracy practices, often while denying they do so. Rozina calls herself literate, although she did not complete the literacy learning course and obtain a certificate: "*I am happy that*

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*I can read and write, and call myself literate".* But several of the case study respondents assert strongly that they are 'illiterate', perhaps because they have never been to school or adult literacy class. *"I am not educated and cannot read and write"*, says Amen the vegetable seller speaking in Urdu, and he repeats it: *"I am not educated and cannot read and write but that does not mean that I am a fool and have no wisdom."* Zia the plumber is stronger in his self-identification: *"I told you, I have never been to school, so how can I read and write?"* was his answer to the researcher's question, "Can you read and write?" He was even more assertive when challenged by the researcher:

*"You can write very well, why did you say you are Jahil [illiterate]?"*

*"I do not have any certificate or paper to show that I am literate, which means I am illiterate. People who are educated like you call me illiterate. Educated people's decision about me perhaps is right, I am illiterate."*

I said, "Illiterates cannot read and write but you can, so you are literate."

He said, *"Bibi, I swear on God I feel good when you say I am literate."*

Shazia the domestic servant too asserts that she is uneducated: when asked to show something she had written, she replied, *"You are highly educated and I have not even attended a school, you will laugh at me"*. And Amen repeats himself, as so often: *"I did not see the inside of a school. So people regard me as illiterate."* Their lack of literacy skills is perceived as a stigma and a disadvantage: *"Now"*, says Zia, *"I am no longer handicapped. I can do my job very well. With on-the-job practice, I am able to read and write"*. Sajid proudly said *"I realise that without knowing it or going to school, we learned a lot at home with my mother. I am not educated or literate but do not depend on others. I can keep and maintain records myself"*.

And yet they all write and read many things. Shazia read the schedule in the kitchen on which the family members had indicated their breakfast preferences and the spice container labels; she wrote a brief message about a phone call and a shopping list of ingredients for a meal, and she kept a notebook of the items taken by the cleaner. But if the researcher had asked her what she was doing on each occasion, she would not have said 'reading' or 'writing' but simply 'preparing breakfast', 'answering the telephone' or 'dealing with the cleaner'. The literacy practices

were so deeply embedded that they had become unconscious. Rana the beggar wrote her own name and dates. The bangle seller and Zia the plumber both offered to provide receipts (in Zia's case, in two languages) while asserting that they were 'illiterate'. As Zia said, *"When [people] ask me, I give them a receipt, and I write down all the names of the parts which I purchased, their cost and my labour charges."* Amen the vegetable seller had taught himself a considerable amount of reading and writing in his own way. Rozina the dyer attached a label to each of the cloths she made. Within the occupations these people did, there were many embedded literacies and numeracies of which they were hardly conscious.

### *Multi-modality*

We also noticed the multi-modality of the literacy practices they engaged in. Amen drew pictures of the vegetables whose names he was learning to write and to read. Zia used a catalogue of plumbing parts to learn from the depictions in it. Shazia took the newspaper during her rest and 'read' it by looking at the pictures and drawing on what she had learned from television with its mixture of pictures and spoken words. Rozina, like Shazia, read labels on bottles. The bangle seller could not explain without bringing out boxes of the items.

### *Language and scripts*

We noticed the facility many of the respondents had with multiple languages – and the way they switched between them, sometimes creating a new language with a mixture of words from each. In Rozina's household, they made a deliberate decision to use as many English words as possible for the sake of the children: *"We have decided that we will use all names in English at home, so that the children will pick them up. For them, it is a matter of satisfaction and pride that they can speak words in English and consider that they know English"*, and her Reading Corner was labelled in Urdu, Sindhi and English. Shazia, a domestic servant, admitted shyly that she could speak four languages: *"Sariaki is my language, Urdu I learned here, Punjabi when I was sent to live in my auntie's house and Sindhi from my neighbours. I can also read the Quran in Arabic"*. Zia too could speak five languages, and knew enough English as well as his native Urdu to be able to write a receipt. Rozina can speak more than two languages. All the people concerned in these case studies have written and can

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speak more than two languages. In literacy terms, this means they switched not only between languages but between different scripts with facility. They were also conscious of the different forms of lay-out of texts – the columns of a newspaper, the format of a receipt, how to draw up lists of items such as Shazia’s laundry list, marks on the sides of boxes. Rana made up the layout of the information on her cards and Rozina on the labels attached to her dupattas. Amen produced circles with some of his writing.

### *Multiple literacies*

We noticed a considerable number of different sets of literacy and numeracy practices. There were religious literacies – Shazia and Sajid had learned Quranic Arabic formally from a religious teacher (*molvi*). The inspiration for Shirin’s family learning programme was religious, both in motivation and in method: as Iffat said, *“Now I can read and write religious songs in Urdu and Sindhi in a much better way. That is what I wanted to do - learn to read and write so I will not be dependent on others to help me in learning the religious songs by heart.”* Speaking of her approach, Shirin said, *“I used a simple technique, I selected words from the Quran which I asked them to read. They read these words, and then I wrote the same words in Urdu and Sindhi and encouraged them to read in Urdu. Initially they said they could not read the words but gradually they started reading without any difficulty.... Iffat and Amma both can read the Quran.”*

There were also work-related literacies which all of them did – Rozina’s specific use of colour naming, Shazia’s schedule of breakfast menu items, keeping records of expenses and the laundry, Rana’s highly specific ways of recording her loans, the bangle seller’s language and literacy practices specific to that trade, Zia’s lists of plumbing parts and labour costs. In some cases, it was the necessity of undertaking certain tasks in the course of their work that inspired them to learn. We noticed the social and socialising literacies within the families and other groups, such as the growing use of mobile phones: Shazia was to get a cell phone to enable her to fulfil her tasks of providing meals for Aleena; and the young men in the bangle shop *“can send messages in Urdu on their mobile phones; they can send messages in English* [he meant messages in Roman script].” And there was of course the schooled literacy of the classroom and the more formal literacy practices of the dominant part of society which most of them aspired to, even while being hesitant about it.

*Formal and informal literacies*

That many of the respondents felt the distinction between the formal literacy of the classroom and their own informal literacies of daily life is clear. They were hesitant to show their writings because they were conscious that it was not up to the standard of the schooled literacy which they knew about, even if they did not possess. "I watched her writing the message on the sheet of paper and when I requested her to show me what she had written, she did so, but with some hesitation...." When the researcher asked to see her notebook, Shazia replied, "*I could not show you*". Amen is not only hesitant in relation to the researcher but even his own children: "*My children do not know that I can write, of course not like you people, but I can write for myself*". Zia says of his literacy, "*Bibi, I cannot read your books and I cannot write as you write, but I can write what I need to write.*" and of his diary, "*Bibi, you cannot understand this, I have written it myself*"; it is not your sort of literacy. "*How can you understand our simple style? I am not educated. Our styles will not work for educated people.*"

This distinction between what they saw as their imperfect literacy and the 'real' literacy led to a fear of being laughed at which comes through time and again. "*This is very simple and people like you will not be able to understand and will laugh*", says Zia. Amen is very bitter about his own children and the other school children who laugh at him, an old man and a vegetable seller, wanting to learn a formal literacy. The gap between these two worlds is very wide: as Sajid the bangle seller says, "*I have never seen the inside of a school, and never understand people like you who are highly educated and what they are talking about.*" And Shirin says of her teaching methods, "*These are very simple methods, not sophisticated like educated and urban people use*".

What was at issue here were two sets of identities, two sets of values. This is most clearly set out by Amen. "*I asked my children to write for me in my diary but they did not do it as they do not like me to sing on the roads... Once I showed it [my diary] to some students who were in 10<sup>th</sup> class and requested them to correct Urdu spellings. They made fun of me and laughed as I am Joker. They said, 'Look, vegetable seller, he wishes to become a poet, very funny'. On that day I promised myself that I will never ever share my poems with anybody in my life*" But he determined to learn on his own: "*So I started looking who can help me. I was also shy to ask people to teach me. I thought they will laugh at*

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*me as had the school boys that an old man instead of doing worship for God wants to learn read and write. Initially I could not find anyone whom I can trust that he will not hurt my intentions, so I said, I will start learning myself... When I tried to get help from school- going children, they made fun of me in my old age".* But despite this, he persevered and triumphed: *"I can tell people that without proper schooling, one can learn basic things which are useful for their day to day small business"* (a key issue that all of the cases in their different ways raise and that has profound implications for how we design and teach literacy programmes).

But he was still conscious that the literacy he had taught himself was not the 'right' literacy. The distinction between the formal classroom literacy and these informal literacies (sometimes called 'local literacies') can be seen in the fact that the literacy taught in the classroom has a standard. It is right or wrong, it is marked with a tick or a cross (a context-specific literacy practice in itself). The informal literacies of the workplace, the home, the market place and the street are less rigid in the ways they evaluate 'right' or 'wrong', 'pass' or 'fail' against the set text of set books like primer. The researcher noted several times – without any sense of criticism – that the spelling of words was often different from the standard spelling, but the sense, the power of communication, remained. "I observed clear, readable, large handwriting although according to the dictionary there were a few mistakes, particularly in the use of letters which have similar sounds"; "There were spelling mistakes but the meaning was clear"; "She wrote only words, not a complete sentence, but the message was clear. There were spelling mistakes". Local informal literacies are more tolerant of different ways of expressing oneself and of what the schooled would call 'mistakes' .

### *Functionalities*

And we noticed that all of these literacies had their own functionality. It is often asserted that there is a universal functionality attached to the schooled literacy of the (adult) classroom, but that literacy will not help with (for example) religious literacies or even, as we have seen, with many of the 'local' literacies our respondents engaged with. The workplace literacy which Shazia and her family had developed has a high level of functionality for that context; Amen's vegetable literacy and Zia's plumbing literacy, while different, were again functional in their context. In the same way Sajid the glass bangle said "I

discussed my problem with an owner of a glass factory and he would arrange for someone to help me and who could train my sons in bangle shop management, using the same language". The religious literacy is functional for both religious purposes and for identification with a religious community. Social literacies are functional for developing social interactions.

### *The functionalities of formal literacy*

The over-claiming of functionality by the schooled literacy is the reason for the hesitations which many of the respondents felt about that form of literacy. Shirin's family group had been taught that the literacy they had learned in the classroom had a functionality in preventing them from being cheated by people who were more illiterate or numerate. But they found by experience that it did not. And the functionalities which it does possess were not necessarily any functionality which they felt they needed. Schooled literacy clearly has a strong functionality for further schooling; one cannot progress in formal education without the schooled literacy of the (adult) classroom; but none of them planned to pursue this route. It has a functionality in obtaining employment in the formal sector, since most employers (private and government) use the schooled literacy as a proxy to help them determine whom to employ – but again none of them expected to seek such employment. Beyond this, it is a limited form of literacy – it would not help the bangle seller with literacy in his language; it would not help Rozina with her colour schemes and it will not help Shazia to do her domestic chores including learning cooking recipes.

### *Literacy, status and identity*

But formal literacy has one other functionality which many of the respondents did seek – and that is status. Several of the respondents valued this functionality and therefore sought after it. Rozina regretted she did not have the formal certificate; Zia felt he needed it to obtain his driving licence. For the formal schooled literacy of the classroom conveys status. It is a very powerful literacy in society, much more powerful than the informal literacies of the church or mosque, the workplace literacies of the kitchen, or the literacies of the marketplace, all of which are seen as inferior to 'the real thing'. Hence the attitudes of the schoolchildren to Amen; hence the fear of many of our

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respondents to show their literacies to the researcher. It was the search for identity, which led Zia and Amen to take such efforts to teach themselves their own kind of formal literacy. Similarly, when Sajid's mother was teaching him relevant skills "She asked us all riddles. They were mostly maths riddles and puzzles based on bangles marketing."

### *What counts as literacy?*

And this is why – and this is perhaps our most important point – so many of these respondents felt that these other informal literacies do not count as literacy. But they are very relevant and helpful to perform the tasks required in the work place, community or religious place. The only literacy which counts to them is the schooled literacy. When Shazia was asked to show her writings and her reading materials to the researcher, she was very hesitant; "*it is not your sort of literacy*", she said. Amen was also very hesitant; Zia at first refused to show his literacy. Even Rozina felt that her way of describing colours was inferior to the literacy taught in the classroom – which must be right. These local literacies do not count; what counts is the standardised schooled variety of literacy alone. The dominance of the schooled literacy is a constant thread through all these case studies, even when the respondents knew that it was only one form of literacy and was in fact limited in terms of its usefulness to them in their lifeworld.

We have then here at least three main groups of meanings of 'literacy'. For Amen and Zia, for Shirin and her family, literacy means the formal literacy being taught in adult literacy classes; and when Shazia says of her notebook, "This is not your literacy", she means by 'literacy' here the formal schooled literacy which she sees being used all around her. Zia and Amen set out deliberately to learn that formal literacy, although they do that learning using their own processes and materials. They see that this schooled literacy carries with it status and social relationships, and they want it; for those who do not possess it in that society are felt to be 'illiterate' with all the stigma that term carries with it. In much the same way, Shirin uses what she sees as a religious literacy to teach her mother in law and sister in law into the more formal literacy which they too aspire to achieve.

Secondly however, some of them recognise that what they are engaged in is a different kind of literacy. Shazia's 'It is not your literacy' is nevertheless recognising that what she is doing is some form of literacy but it does not carry with it social approval ("you

will laugh at me", not at *it* but at *me*). The only approved kind of literacy in her society is the schooled variety.

But thirdly, there are some here who engage in practices to which they deny the word literacy at all. What Rana does with her coloured cards recording the loans and repayments, what goes on inside the bangle shop are not even graced with the title of 'literacy', let alone numeracy. 'This is what we do' to fulfil the tasks we have before us; but it is not even 'a' literacy.

### *Local and global literacies*

There has been a good deal of debate in academic circles about the distinction between these 'local' literacies and 'the global' or standardised literacy. It has been suggested that the local is very limited, that introducing the global or dominant literacy will open doors and widen horizons. Our case studies suggest that such a dichotomy may be too simplistic. Zia and Amen were searching for the standardised while creating their own local literacies; they both used (indeed developed on their own) formal methods of learning, and sought help from those who had been formally educated. The global and the local interact; the local draws on perceptions of the global, although the global tends to ignore or demean the local or deny its very existence.

### *The reflexivity of the writers*

And one of the more striking elements of these stories is the way in which so many of the case studies were reflexive in their approach to the development of their skills. Shazia knew a great deal about herself and how she learned, what gaps she had. Rana could express clearly herself clearly about where she came from, where she is going and how she intends to get there. Both Zia and Amen were very conscious of what they had done and what they felt to be their limitations; they could follow the steps they had taken and they determined for themselves how successful they had been. Rozina again knew that her codes were different from what she regarded as normal; and the bangle seller was intensely concerned about his work and the future. The level of articulation about themselves, their learning and their literacies is remarkable.

### *'Levels' of literacy and certification*

Which raises the issue of 'levels' of literacy and with it certification. Few of the respondents sought certification. But formal literacy will seek to establish some kind of 'level' of literacy.

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How can one compare the literacy practices of Shazia the domestic servant with those of Zia the plumber and his with those of Amen the fruit and vegetable seller? Both Zia the plumber and Sajid the bangle seller can provide hand written receipts but that does not mean their 'levels' of literacy skills are the same.

### *Literacy and numeracy integrated*

Finally, we noticed how numeracy was embedded within specific situations, never done in a decontextualised way. Amounts were measured, items counted, sums calculated and recorded in written or other formats all in relation to a specific transaction. Literacy and numeracy in real life are integrated, not compartmentalised as in literacy learning programmes.

## LEARNING

Perhaps the thing which struck all of us most were the many different ways in which our respondents learned the skills they felt they needed – the efforts some of them put into it, the seriousness, self determination, and commitment with which people tackled what they aspired to do.

### *Formal and informal learning*

A good deal has been written about the distinction between informal learning and formal learning – the difference between what one of us has called 'task-conscious learning' and 'learning-conscious learning'. In the former, much learning is going on while undertaking a task – the way the shop assistants in the bangle shop learned the language and practices of selling bangles, for example – where the measure of the achievement is the satisfactory completion of the task. On the other hand, there are more formal learning programmes where the learning is conscious and the measure of achievement is expressed in terms of how much has been learned. Both Rozina and Shirin's family group attended formal adult literacy classes where 'learning-conscious learning' was going on – they went there specifically to 'learn' literacy and judged the achievement in terms of 'how much literacy have I learned?'

### **Mixed formal and informal learning**

But what we found in practice was that in almost every case, there was a mixture of formal and informal methods. The informal

methods of learning are clear. Shazia learned simply on the job, by doing what she had to do. As the researcher suggests, the whole house, the people in it and the tasks she had to do formed a complete learning environment in which she could not help but learn all the time. Rana learned the skills of begging by observing and begging on the street, not by going to school. Rozina learned her colour descriptions from her community almost without noticing . it; she was surprised that the researcher was surprised at it. The staff at the bangle shop again learned the language and processes simply by having to use them.

### *Scaffolding for learning*

And yet in almost every case, there was some more formal scaffolding to assist them in their self-appointed task. Apart from her experience of formal school in the religious education she received, Shazia has never been to school. She learned to read the Holy Quran with Aleena from Molvi Sahib who came to teach Aleena at home, and as a child, she was taught (in play) by her peer Aleena using formal methods which Aleena had learned in school. They *"pored over the pictures together ... she taught me how to write the names of spices, food and relatives. She helped me when I was little and she became my teacher and I learned many words from her"* (note the use of the words 'taught', 'teacher' and 'learned'). Again, she read some of the school texts which Aleena got for her from school. When she became the domestic helper in the household, she had more formal instruction from Rida, Aleena's mother. *"Nowadays, Aleena is teaching me how to use a mobile, and then she will buy a mobile for me"*. Amen and Zia both sought out and used formal methods of learning, either from organisations or institutions or from individuals they had selected. For many, the formal Quranic learning programmes provided scaffolding for other kinds of learning. Shazia was allowed by her mother and by Aleena's mother to learn alongside her childhood friend. Sajid *"learned to read and write from Molve Sahib"*, his Quranic teacher. Several of them participated, if only for a short time, in formal programmes of adult literacy learning, even though they did not find them fit for their purposes.

### *Human resources for learning*

Most of this scaffolding came from other persons; they called upon other individuals to help them learn – a normal collaborative

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way in which most adults learn; and while that led to some instability in the learning process (people die or move away), none came to a full stop, they were all able to continue to develop along their chosen path. A very wide range of people were involved in this learning. Shazia says she learned *"from every member of the household"*. Zia first learned his plumbing from his father and an uncle. Amen learned from various people he met, especially *"one of his lady customers, Hamida"*. Sajid the bangle seller said, *"Our forefathers who were not educated created similar words and passed them on to the new generation in the glass bangles factories and glass bangles shops"*. *"I will not learn from books"*, said Zia; ... *"I will learn from your cook Rahim."* He said he learned how to drive *"from my friends"*, and *"I got help from the customers who came into the plumbing shop, and I found that there are so many people around who can help if you ask. So with the help of my customers, friends and ordinary people and with my own help, I learned"*. And he learned English as he *"worked with an English family."* Rana carefully observed beggars, how they begged and then decided to develop her own style. Sajid's learning help came from his mother who taught him maths, from his father who taught him Urdu, from the Imam hired to teach him and his family the Quran who also taught him maths, and from the *munshi* who also taught him Urdu. The distinction between formal and informal learning fades away under this intensive and half planned learning programme; what we have is a continuum between the formal end of the spectrum and the informal end, with most learning activities being hybrids occupying a position with different mixes somewhere between these two extremes.

### *Relationships*

The key issue here was a matter of relationships – informal but close, with trust and respect on both sides, sharing and hard work, often spread over a considerable time but at other times of short duration. Zia said of his new 'teacher, the cook Rahim, that they *"felt very close to each other and felt they had built a new relationship"*. Amen saw in Hamida someone *"whom he felt he could trust. Hamida worked in a school and was a regular customer. She was in her late fifties, and when she saw Amen's commitment and interest, she promised to help him. She gave a suggestion for the title of 'cash book' and showed him how to write 'Amen vegetable seller"*. She also taught him the proper use of a

calculator.” All learning here was tailor-made to suit the individual.

### *Sources of learning*

But these were not the only sources of learning. Shazia learned a great deal from television, including how to remove stains as well as news events. Rozina learned from films, as did Amen, even from films in a foreign language. Rozina learned her dyeing from the adult literacy class, more skills training than literacy training; then a professional dyer provided tips and techniques and she continued her learning through magazines. They all learned simply by doing their tasks: their ‘illiteracy’ did not prevent them from learning. Shazia said that by practice she had learned the names of the clothes and that “she can read and recognise the names of all the spices and she learned them by using the spices bottles”. *“With on-the-job practice I am able to read and write”*, said Zia. The bangle staff could only learn by doing the work of the shop. As the researcher said of Shazia, the whole environment, people, context and tasks, formed a learning environment, even if the persons engaged in learning did not realise they were learning. Amen had learned from the large posters round the town advertising adult education centres, although he did not go near one. They learned by practice, by problem-solving in everyday life: *“when I was very little, I started to solve many small plumbing problems”*, said Zia. Perhaps the clearest example of the way learning was conducted comes from Rozina:

*“My friends told me that I am very good at dyeing and in making designs on dupattas, so I started dyeing pieces of old cloth at home. With practice, I learned colour mixing. However, I had problems with some colours, which I discussed with my husband. He said, “I know a dyer in Hyderabad and I will ask him about colour mixing”. He learned from the dyer in the city and then he taught me. He also brings colours for me from the city, and a colour-seller also gave me some hints. Therefore, with information from the dyer, the colour-seller and with a lot of practice, now I can dye in any colour and make designs”.*

### *Planning their own learning programmes*

One of the things which struck us strongly was the way in which these people, most of them designating themselves ‘illiterate’, planned learning programmes. Two of them, Zia and Amen, set out learning programmes for themselves, Amen in six stages, Zia in ten steps. They were carefully planned, realistic and were kept

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to. Zia had completed all ten of his steps, Amen was on stage four but felt he could achieve his final goal of obtaining a loan to open a shop for himself.

Three others planned learning programmes for others. Rozina taught members of her family what she had herself learned only a few months before. But the most elaborate were Shirin and Sajid. Shirin, who had taken a successful adult literacy course, entered the household of her mother-in-law who, with her daughter, had taken a different literacy course without success. To counter this deep sense of disappointment, she devised a careful programme of learning, using words from religious texts in Arabic and Urdu, switching from one language to another (Sind), creating games and puzzles, with great success. Sajid too created an elaborate programme of learning mathematics for his younger family members and his staff, based upon the word and number games he used to play within his family when he was young. None of these had had any training as facilitators, yet they developed programmes which any experienced facilitator would be proud of – and which were more successful than some of the formal adult literacy classes.

And one lesson which they learned was that these adults learnt literacy best by whole word recognition - words which meant something to the learners, not words chosen by an outside agency. They did not start with copying letters or with phonic syllables. Zia broke down some of his words into syllables so that he could *"make new words from the parts of the words."* . But most of them chose whole words which their learners used regularly in their trade or their religion and they learned by these words which were familiar and meant much to them, not from words chosen by an educator for their 'syllabic value'. They did not move from the simple to the complex; they used words which they knew and used everyday.

### *The effort of learning*

The sheer effort which went into this learning is amazing. Rana spent four days watching beggars to learn how it was done. Amen visited his self-appointed 'teacher' twice a week and spent hours practising his new skills, covering page after page with writing and drawings. Zia too spent many hours with his 'teacher' Rahim and practising on his own: *"At home, I practised putting the word card in front of the picture card of the tool. It was my homework to practise ten words and match them with their picture. I was*

*spending hours and hours on my practice, almost all my free time; I liked all this very much.”* Very different from most adult literacy learning courses. They acquired materials for themselves, buying notebooks, diaries, pens. Having met with disappointment when he asked others to help him, Amen said to himself, *“I will start learning myself. So I went to Urdu Bazaar [a famous market for books and learning materials] and bought some vegetable charts and fruit charts with their names. Because my drawing was good, so I said, I will use my drawing to learn names. I prepared a work plan for myself. I promised myself I will keep strong commitment towards my learning; this is the need of my business, I am interested in it, and it will be fun also.”*

### *Materials for learning*

What the learners selected for their learning was what was immediately relevant to them. Shazia may have used some school textbooks but they meant something to her, for they were used by her great friend Aleena. Zia used diagrams of parts for plumbing which he collected; Amen used pictures of vegetables and fruit, some of which he drew for himself. Those who helped them to learn invented games, word and number games; they used religious texts and anything the learners were interested in. The bangle seller went into great detail how he planned learning activities for his children and his staff to achieve their goals of mastering the mathematics of bangle selling. How to develop learning programmes using materials which come from and are relevant to each individual adult learner while retaining a sense of the general is an issue for all planners and programme makers, as well as for facilitators of formal adult literacy classes.

### *Attitudes towards the formal*

We found in these case studies very mixed attitudes towards formal learning, towards forms of education. Conscious that this was something good which they lacked, they also had negative attitudes towards some of its processes and outcomes. Rana was very hostile to formal schooling for her daughter; *“over my dead body she will go to school”* was her strongly worded statement. She would *“become spoiled, learn reading and writing, and start writing letters to boys”*. It was not something appropriate for people like Rana and many other families and would teach the children undesirable practices: *“I do not want this to happen. Education is not for poor people. We cannot follow rich people.”*

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Thus Shazia could say without any irony or self-pity, that *"When she was small and did not realise her status, she herself made certain marks or copied what Rida had written."* Learning the Quran was acceptable: "When the teacher came to teach the Quran to Aleena, she also taught Shazia; at the request of Shazia's mother, Rida allowed Shazia to learn to read the Quran in Arabic with Aleena". After all, as Rana said, she *"belonged to a very poor family and nobody from her family in the last three or four generations ever went to formal school. Women in the family mostly work as housemaids in different houses and the males are usually casual labourers, not having permanent jobs."*

Amen's attitude was more mixed. He wanted his son to have full schooling and tried to persuade him to stay on, but at the same time he felt school had spoiled his son for any useful activity. *"I admitted him in an English medium school, but after one year he left school and said school is very boring. Other students make fun of him and say 'Son of vegetable seller is studying in English medium school. He wants to be equal of us Ha-- ha -ha'. So he left school, but he does not want to assist me as he got this impression that I am in a job which is not respectable even if I have money. Now he is not doing anything. I want him to do his study or assist me in selling vegetables"*. When asked, *"Have you ever been to school?"* he said, *"Never ever. I wished I could but there was no school in my area and I was assisting my father when I was very small, but to see my son's school and his attitude, I am thankful that I did not go to school"*. He blames schooling for the attitudes of some of his customers: *"But now new people came into my areas and they do not know me, old people have moved, migrated and/or sold their houses. Now my customers demand receipts and I took it as an insult to me that they are not trusting me. They do the calculation on paper and I do it in my head. Although my calculation is always right and many occasions their calculations are wrong, but they insisted that they are right because they are educated and just because I am not educated, so I am wrong and I could be wrong. So this hurts me a lot, but these are my customers, so I cannot say any harsh thing"*. And when a customer had challenged his additions of her bill, he commented to the researcher after the customer had departed: *"Baity, you know she teaches maths in school but is not able to do simple maths. That is the reason I do not like school education - just a waste of time. People like me need practical skills like selling, marketing and record keeping, profit and loss. Tell me,*

*which school is teaching us all this in a short time, that which is useful for our small business and to attract our customers? Anyway, I worked out and solved my problem without going to any school or centre".*

Zia too was "angry and critical of formal schooling and wanted some alternatives for working people like himself". Sajid the bangle seller too complained of the attitudes which he believed formal schooling cultivated in the school children. When asked, "Why are you so unhappy with educated people?" he said very strongly, "No not all, not with all educated people. I sit in my shop and deal with all kinds of people, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, and all ages of people. But I do hate girls from the English medium and what they think about us." I asked, "How do you know what they think about you?" He said, "On a number of occasions, I noticed that fashionable girls come into my shop and talk to each other in a derogatory fashion about us, about our profession and about the language which we use in our shop."

"I sent them [my son and my nephew] to school for four years and they did not learn anything noticeable except bad habits. They learned nothing which can help them in the family business, not even simple mathematics ... in four years, they did not even learn proper reading and writing. Not only that, they started devaluing their own family business and refused to give me a hand after school. They said, 'We will not work in the shop because our class fellows do not give us respect and call us 'Choori Walay' [people who sell bangles]. Four years of schooling harmed them in so many ways rather than benefited them. If they had spent these four years in the shop, then they would have learned a lot. I wasted money and also their time ... I have no belief in paper qualifications. So my children are learning those things which are useful for their business lives. Take my example, I have never been to school but I learned reading and writing and the maths which are necessary for my job without knowing that I am learning." I asked, "Are you against education?" He said very forcefully, "No, not at all, but I am very frustrated with the type of education and the attitudes that formal school is creating. I need useful education for my children which I am trying to provide through home teaching and through learning practical skills on the job. Why can't school do this?" So he had developed his own system of learning based on what had occurred in his family when he was younger – full of games and as he put it, "fun".

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Several of the respondents tended to imply that mental calculation was better than the formal mathematics of the paper book or the calculator. Amen says of his vegetable and fruit customers, *"They do the calculation on paper and I do it in my head. Although my calculation is always right and on many occasions their calculations are wrong, but they insist that they are right because they are educated, and just because I am not educated, so I am wrong."* He did learn to use the calculator but he said that he "rechecked the total using mental arithmetic. If his answer and the calculator answer matched, then it was okay, but if not, then he trusted his own mental mathematics answer. Amen told me that gradually he started using the calculator with accuracy, but he still has confidence in his mental maths. According to him, mental maths is fast and more reliable." The teacher of mathematics to the bangle seller *"never used paper or pen. He spoke the sums out loud, and encouraged us to give the answers orally and do the working out in our heads. When the answer was correct, he would give us ravri [a kind of local sweet]. My father would do the same and I practised mental arithmetic on the job."*

Despite this, most of the respondents wished to send their children to school. Rozina's mother said, *"Now I will send my grand daughter to a private school."* And both Amen and Zia modelled their learning programmes on formal schooling. Indeed, Zia tried to use an adult literacy class to solve one of his literacy problems but the inflexibility of the facilitator prevented him. Although he had strongly negative attitudes towards formal schooling based on the experience of his son, Amen knew enough about formal methods to use them informally himself. He practised and practised writing words, as did Zia. Shirin's family group acknowledged that they had benefited from formal literacy teaching and yet at the same time they felt they had been cheated by the formal adult literacy classes. Saied the bangle seller felt his staff would learn best on the job rather than go to formal school but in fact he created a form of informal school.

### *Participation in formal adult literacy classes*

Five of the people involved in these case studies attended formal adult literacy classes at some time. Rozina's story is perhaps the most revealing. Rozina participated in the ESRA-ILM programme, but (as the researcher noted) "she had not initially learned from

the literacy centre but rather from her literacy centre friends who helped her by teaching her at home. Because of her pregnancy problem, she only joined the literacy centre in the second half when the course content was more creative, skills-based and placed more emphasis on practical activities. She not only learned literacy skills but also sustained these skills by joining the Family Reading Program and she later became a regular user of the LRC. She not only involved all her family in her literacy activities/practices but also became an earning member of the family." She was very disappointed that the rules of the programme prevented her from taking the examination and obtaining the certificate. She also learned her dyeing in that course and this became eventually an income-generation activity for herself, and she used the literacy skills she had learned for her work, writing labels to be attached to each cloth she dyed. Shirin too attended an ESRA-ILM programme to very good effect. Zia enrolled in the state-sponsored three months literacy course to learn the literacy required for obtaining a driving licence but again found that its requirements were too rigid to allow him to learn what he needed: *"In my area, an NGO opened an adult literacy centre. I thought it is only a matter of three months; I will get a certificate and learn more. So I obtained admission to attend this literacy centre. They started teaching me ABC. I told them that I can write a few words, just teach me some words related to driving. However, the teacher refused and said, 'We will teach according to our programme, not according to your programme'. I found this useless. What they are teaching, I already knew. I went there to learn more, not what I already knew, and to get a certificate, which will be helpful for me. So I left the centre."* Shirin's Amma and her sister-in-law Iffat too attended the three-month course and learned very little: *"The course was very boring and the teacher treated us like very small children."* Like Zia, she was not treated like an adult: *"One day I did not go to the centre and the next day when I went to the class, I asked Rahima, another literacy centre learner, what happened in my absence. The teacher who was like a baity [daughter] to me said with anger, 'Do not talk in class and open your book at page nine'. I did not like this behaviour at all. I wanted to get out but Iffat stopped me from leaving the centre."* The keenness to learn literacy in these cases is remarkable, for other studies have suggested that many people attend adult literacy classes more for the skill training and knowledge component than for acquiring literacy skills.

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### *Pace of learning*

One theme which seems to emerge from the case studies is that the pace of learning in the formal school, as in the formal adult literacy programme, is too slow. Both Amen's son and Sajid's young people found school "very boring", and speaking of the formal adult literacy class, Iffat said, "The course was very boring". The adult learners not only can move faster but they need to, they don't have all the time in the world. Zia commented on how fast he learned in his informal relationship with Rahim the cook: "In a period of four months I learned the basic things and later on, with practice, I was able to read and write ... We do not have years to spend just in learning the few things which we need for our jobs." Shirin suggested that her initial approach to learning was not fast enough for her learner: "She was interested in quick learning and I was using a primer-based approach".

### *Control of the learning*

The key element in all these out of school cases was the fact that the control of learning lay with the learner. They chose whom to approach; they chose what to learn and how – the use of vegetables and fruit by Amen, the use of plumbing parts by Zia. Rana chose to go to the local community of beggars and learn from them (this is a good example of learning by peripheral participation in a community of practice – see forthcoming article by Rafat Nabi and Alan Rogers in TATE). Zia seized a moment to set up a learning programme for himself with a cook, sitting by the sea and later on by himself, "So I used the same patterns as before. Now I am thinking to teach my brothers in the same way. Amen again chose someone to help him; and when she was no longer accessible, he carried on on his own. It is noticeable that both of these chose deliberately to accept the help of persons on a similar social level to themselves – a cook and a domestic servant rather than the help offered by people they saw as 'above' them; class, caste and gender played a part here as it did (negatively) in the case of Shazia.

### *Motivation for learning*

The case of Zia points to the motivation for such learning. Much of this informal learning was unconscious, building up tacit funds of knowledge which the respondents did not know they had. "I have never been to school but I learned reading and writing and

*the maths which are necessary for my job without knowing that I am learning,*" said Amen. Shazia learned enough literacy for her work but showed no signs of wishing to learn more, for that (to her) would mean changing her status in the household. But in the more conscious programmes which others set for themselves, the aspiration was for some form of change. Rana found change forced upon her but she seized the opportunity and *"decided to develop her own begging style"*, learning as she went; and when she had to cope with more money than she had ever had before, she learned new skills of money-lending. Change led to learning and learning led to further changes. Rozina learned dyeing skills in the literacy class and then found herself gradually drawn into making that into an income generation activity. "Shirin analysed the failure of her teaching learning program with her buddy and in the light of this learning developed a more relevant learning programme for her in-laws. Zia changed jobs several times and learned new skills each time in a variety of ways, and this learning in turn led to further changes: *"As soon as my boss in the plumber shop where I work appreciated that I can read and write, he raised my salary and gave me some extra responsibilities and put me in charge of other plumbers."* Amen was moved by the Millennium to rethink his life: *"This year I promised myself that I will learn to read and write and how to write receipts. Because now time is changed"*. Finding himself in a new age (*"Now new people came into my areas and they do not know me, old people have moved, migrated and or sold their houses. Now my customers demand receipts"*), he too wished to change, to settle down and buy a shop for himself as he felt he was getting too old to continue to walk the streets selling his fruit and vegetables. He felt he needed literacy for this task. For him and for Zia, learning literacy was an investment for the future. Nor were these aspirations for oneself only – they were also for the children and for other relatives: "Rana wanted her jobless relatives to get a job or do some business. Therefore, she lends money to those who are interested". Rozina promised herself "Now I will send my granddaughter to a private school. A little knowledge of reading and writing changed our home atmosphere,."

### *Seizing the moment*

How long such motivations had been harboured we do not know; but Zia's case study points to an important issue – 'the moment' which had to be seized. Motivation can be held for many years;

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but when an opportunity comes along, it will often be seized. *"I do not know what made me say it"* at that moment is how Zia expressed it. It was not a matter of waiting until a new set of adult literacy lessons started; it was a matter of now or never. How to develop adult literacy learning programmes to take advantage of such 'moments' must be a key concern for all planners and policy makers – perhaps the use of 'drop-in' centres would help.

### *The achievements*

The amount of literacy and numeracy skills which each of these people achieved is truly remarkable. Shazia had a wide range of reading and writing skills – and knew the gaps she possessed. Rana had developed very considerable numeracy skills, keeping accounts of her earnings from begging and of her loans, although her literacy skills were minimal. "It was amazing to see that one year before Rozina could not read or write", is the comment of the researcher; yet she was using her literacy skills for her dyeing activities and teaching her husband. Amen had a wide range of items he had written, and Zia too, while still denying he was 'literate' used his writing skills extensively in his work. Amma and Iffat learned a great deal when Shirin came to live with them: *"When Shirin came into our house, she started what she called FRP [Family Reading Programme] and she sat with me and Amma. With everyone's co-operation, she developed a teaching programme for me and Amma, and now I can read and write religious songs in Urdu and Sindhi in a much better way. That is what I wanted to do - learn to read and write so I will not be dependent on others to help me in learning the religious songs by heart."* And Saied, despite his denials, was using both literacy and numeracy practices while training his own family and his staff in his bangle shop.

### *Sharing learning*

And having learned, they are continuing their learning. Rozina is still adding to her Reading Corner. Shirin says, *"Nowadays, Amma tells us stories from her time and how to prepare treatments from local herbs. I am writing down all these things in our family book."* And they find themselves sharing their learning with others. Shirin is the clearest example of this, helping her Amma and Iffat to learn the skills she had learned. Rozina taught her husband what she knew, and he in turn taught her what he learned on his travels to

Hyderabad. Rahim learned from his Begum Sahiba and he offered to teach Zia, who in turn is keen to pass on his new knowledge and skills: *“Now I am thinking to teach my brothers in the same way; one is learning driving and one is a cook in somebody’s house.”*

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE**

We do not wish to say that all adult non-learners are like these. We do wish to assert strongly that such experiences and attitudes exist in every society and that we must adjust our programmes to meet these as well as other approaches.

There are many lessons which policy makers, planners and teachers of adults can draw from these case studies, many challenges to their assumptions about the learners and their aspirations. Of these, we focus on one or two points only.

#### *A diversity of provision*

One conclusion which we would wish to draw from our case studies is that a one-size-fits-all programme using a standardised textbook cannot meet the many different experiences and aspirations which exist in society. We see in the case studies several examples how such a programme let down some of these people. Shirin’s family group felt they had been deliberately misled by the claims for a formal literacy learning programme. The facilitator whom Zia approached refused to adapt to meet his needs and insisted he start at the beginning and follow the course through its set sequence. Different approaches will be needed for different learning needs and experience. Much greater flexibility will be needed to meet the aspirations of adult learners; and facilitators need help and support so that they can develop greater confidence to handle many different situations as they arise. Drop-in centres may help to provide opportunities to many adults at the time and situation when they need help with literacy and numeracy.

#### *A new attitude towards the learners*

The second key change required is a new attitude towards the learners. They do not come to the class as ‘illiterate’. Everyone of them has some experience of literacy. Some may be completely

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non-literate but nevertheless they will have developed many different skills while negotiating a literate world, ways of handling literacy and numeracy situations, finding their own ways of recording calculations and financial transactions, using mediators to write and read when they need. Just as Amen used his son “*to keep the records of daily expenses*”, and the granddaughter of one of his customers to write down his songs for him after his own children had refused to help him, so many of the learners will have their own strategies for working their way through the literacy world. Some will have developed some informal literacy skills of their own but skills which they will not regard as literacy. Indeed, they may not even know they use them and may deny having any literacy at all. Every individual learner will come with their own funds of knowledge and skills, with their own set of perceptions about what literacy is and about themselves, with their own aspirations. How to cater for such a wide range of people is what makes teaching adults so demanding; but unless this is done, there will be little or no effective learning in the class.

### *Working with the learners*

And with levels of achievement from self-directed learning such as these narratives reveal, the justification of not allowing open access to the public examinations leading to the award for certificates is surely in question. The opportunity to sit for a test and obtain a recognised qualification would certainly inspire some people like Zia, Shirin and even perhaps Iffat and Shazia to greater and more systematic efforts on their own; and to deny others like Rozina the right to participate in these examinations is surely unjust. Even Amen might have been even more focussed on learning if he had such a goal in view. As our case studies show, many people are self-motivated to learn literacy and numeracy skills and do not find in the formal adult literacy provision what they feel they need to help them. Opening public examinations to any adult without specifying the precise route by which they should arrive at that staging post and by providing drop-in centres where people like Zia, Amen, Amma and even Sajid, can obtain directly the help *they* need and *when* they need it, so that they can continue to make progress and achieve their own goals would do more for adult literacy and numeracy learning in many developing countries than any other single action.

Likewise, exposing adult literacy tutors to the kinds of stories we have discussed here and to the ethnographic perspectives

indicated in the Introduction, and as we are finding in the LETTER programme in which all of us have been involved (see Street et al 2006), can lead to a more learner-sensitive approach to adult literacy programmes. It is possible to develop training and support systems for facilitators to encourage them to work with their learners to draw upon the experience, knowledge, skills and aspirations which all learners bring to the class. Collecting the experiences from the learners (i.e. listening before talking); debating these experiences with the whole group, exploring them in their social context; using materials which the learners bring into the classroom alongside the standardised textbook materials; building on these experiences to bring new knowledge and new skills to the learners – such a process can lead to more effective ways of helping adults to develop further the literacy and numeracy practices which they have already developed through learning in life. In many cases that learning may not meet changing needs, and people want help in expanding their repertoire. Building on what they know is not about simply celebrating where people are at without changing anything, but it does involve giving the learners much more control over their own learning processes, somewhat like the conscious and planned learning systems which Zia and Amen developed for themselves. It involves recognising the skills and knowledge learners already have, even as they enhance it with the help of facilitators. This collaboration between learners and facilitators, rather than top-down imposition by educational systems and adult literacy programmes, is essential for effective adult learning. And that will mean changing the way facilitators think about both literacy and learning and how they think about both the learners and themselves – not simply as ‘teachers’ but as friends and assistants, people like Aleena and Zia’s cook and Amen’s friendly customer.



## SHAZIA, DOMESTIC SERVANT

### PLATE I (page 33)



*Some of the shirts which the washman brought but tried to steal one and so lost his job. Shazia's note book told the truth.*

### PLATE II (page 35)



*Shazia showed me the portions of the wall where she pasted posters of spices, cereals, kitchen articles, food items and other household articles. She said that these posters are fulltime teachers for her and she learned from them without any hesitation. She could read some words from the posters in English, as they were used in the household everyday.*

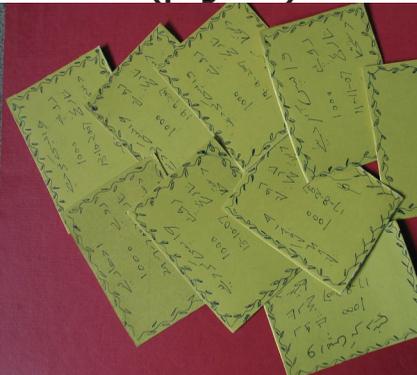
## RANA, STREET BEGGAR

### PLATE III (page 40)



*Rana's box with twelve sections, each section represents one month. She keeps records on a monthly basis when she gives loans. Rana made this box from a shoebox. She covered the box with red cloth and decorated it. Different coloured cards represent different values. When Rana gives loans, she creates two sets of card, one set for herself and one set for her borrowers. On the cards she writes the amount, date and both signatures.*

### PLATE IV (page 42)



*Gulab Khan's yellow cards: each card gives four kinds of information. The title of the card (returned); the amount of money returned; date of return; and signature of Rana. Very simple recording system.*

**ROZINA, DYER**

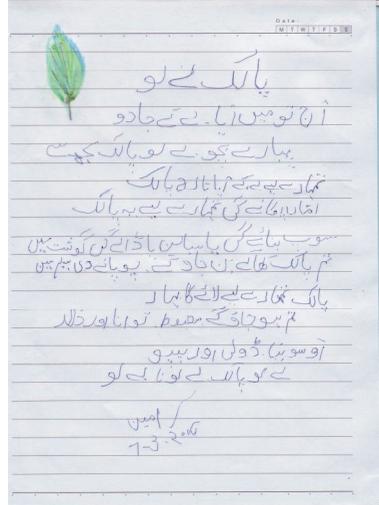
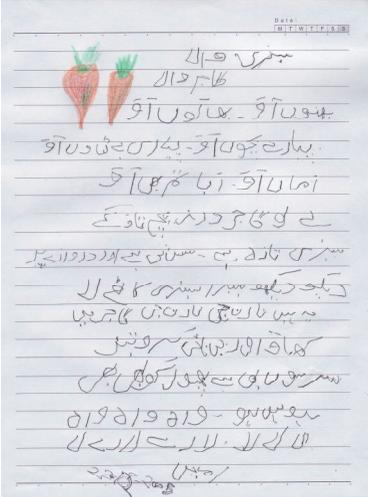
**PLATE V (page 49)**



*Amma gave me a gift of a dupatta which Rozina had dyed in three primary colours.*

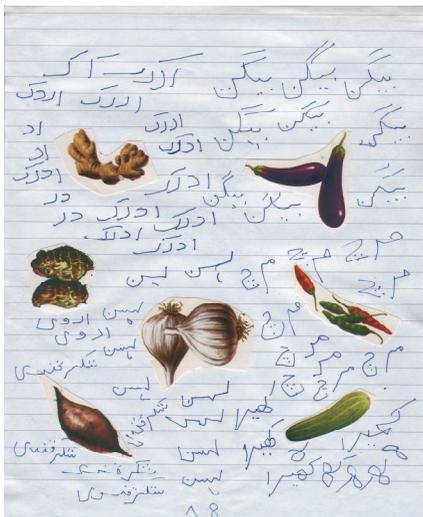
**AMEN, VEGETABLE SELLER**

**PLATE VI (page 57)**



*Songs from Amen Baba's diary. After practice, his writing and spelling have improved and he made fewer mistakes from a dictionary point of view.*

**PLATE VII (page 59)**



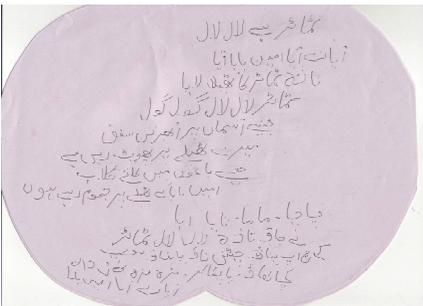
Amen Baba copied the spellings of words from the charts, then practised these spellings many times around the picture.

## PLATE VIII (page 63)



*Spring on Amen Baba's vegetable cart. He claims to bring fresh vegetables, which gives a feeling of spring to the buyers.*

## POSTSCRIPT: PLATE IX (page 63)



*I visited Pakistan in April 2008 and went to Hyderabad to meet Amen Baba. However, Amen Baba had died and left a gift for me, which was a diary containing songs that he had written. This song is taken from a small booklet he made himself, cut out and coloured in the shape of two tomatoes. The song is about the tomato.*

## SHIRIN'S FAMILY

### PLATE X (page 82)



*I met Amma and her family in the hotel, so I was not able to take a photograph of her house and reading corner which every member of the Family Reading Programme established in their home. This is a typical reading corner created at Shirin's friend's home in Hala city.*

## AHTIRAM, BANGLE SELLER

### PLATE XI (page 94)



*Ahtiram in his bangle shop. There are bangles of different colours, sizes and design in the cabinet. Light from the high-powered bulbs make the cabinet shine and customers are attracted by the light reflecting and refracting from the glass bangles. A popular and powerful marketing strategy*



*In a katta there are 136 bangles and in a tora there are 272 bangles.*



*This photograph was taken in the store of Ahtiram's bangle shop. The symbols indicating sizes are clearly marked as well as words (in Urdu) indicating the colour and design. When the shopkeeper asks his assistant to bring a certain sort of bangle, he stipulates size, design, row and box number. The boxes are kept in a very simple order, even I could find what was required after only two or three practices. A simple, workable and effective arrangement*