

RISE IN LITERACY RATE

India has made significant strides in improving its literacy rate since gaining independence in 1947. At the time of independence, the literacy rate stood at a mere 18.3%. Today, it has climbed to approximately 77.7% as per the National Statistical Office (NSO) report of 2022. This increase reflects the nation's consistent focus on education as a tool for empowerment and development. Literacy is widely recognized as one of the most powerful drivers of social and economic progress, and India's journey in this regard has been long but purposeful.

One of the major contributors to this upward trend has been the Indian government's sustained investment in education through large-scale policy initiatives. Programs such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched in 2001, aimed to provide free and compulsory education to children aged 6 to 14 years. This initiative laid the foundation for increased enrolment, especially in rural and backward areas. Similarly, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, introduced nationally in 1995, significantly boosted school attendance by addressing child hunger and encouraging families to send their children to school.

The Right to Education (RTE) Act, passed in 2009, was another watershed moment. This law made education a fundamental right for all children in the 6-14 age group and mandated minimum standards for schools, teacher-student ratios, and infrastructure. It also emphasized the inclusion of marginalized groups, thereby narrowing the literacy gap between urban and rural populations and among different socio-economic classes.

Gender disparity in literacy has also seen improvement over the years. As of recent data, male literacy in India stands at approximately 84.7%, while female literacy is around 70.3%. Although the gap still exists, the difference has steadily reduced due to targeted schemes such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, which focus on educating the girl child and improving gender equality in access to education. Community engagement, awareness drives, and incentives for girls' education have also contributed significantly to narrowing this divide.

Regionally, states like Kerala, Mizoram, and Himachal Pradesh have achieved literacy rates above 90%, often cited as models of effective education policy and social awareness. On the other hand, states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand continue to lag behind, although they have also shown steady improvement due to increased government intervention and public-private partnerships.

Urban areas enjoy higher literacy rates—often above 87%—compared to rural areas, which average around 73%. The disparity can be attributed to better infrastructure, teacher availability, and parental awareness in urban settings. However, rural India has shown significant progress, particularly due to grassroots campaigns, community schools, and digital learning initiatives.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought education to a critical juncture, forcing a transition to online learning. While it exposed the digital divide in India, it also sparked innovation in remote learning, reaching students in previously underserved areas through TV, radio, and mobile apps. Post-pandemic, the push for digital literacy has intensified, with programs aimed at equipping both students and teachers with technological skills necessary for 21st-century learning.

India's rise in literacy rate is a testament to its dedication to educational reform and inclusive development. While the journey has been marked by significant progress, the ultimate goal of universal, quality education remains a work in progress. Achieving this will require collaborative efforts between the government, civil society, educators, and communities to ensure that every citizen, regardless of gender, caste, or location, has the opportunity to become literate and empowered.

Mohan Bhagwat-a personality who inspired by principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam

■ NARENDRA MODI

Today is September 11th. This day evokes two contrasting remembrances. The first dates back to 1893, when Swami Vivekananda delivered his iconic Chicago address. With the few words, "Sisters and Brothers of America," he won the hearts of thousands present in the hall. He introduced the timeless spiritual heritage of India and the emphasis on universal brotherhood to the world stage. The second is the gruesome 9/11 attacks, when this very principle came under attack thanks to the menace of terrorism and radicalism.

There is something else about this day which is noteworthy. Today is the birthday of a personality who, inspired by the principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, has dedicated his entire life to societal transformation and strengthening the spirit of harmony and fraternity. For lakhs of people associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, he is respectfully referred to as Param Pujya Sarsanghchalak. Yes, I am referring to Shri Mohan Bhagwat Ji, whose 75th birthday is, incidentally, falling in the same year when the RSS marks its centenary. I would like to convey my best wishes to him and pray for his long and healthy life.

My association with Mohan Ji's family has been very deep. I have had the good fortune of working closely with Mohan Ji's father, the late Madhukarrao Bhagwat Ji. I have written extensively about him in my book, Jyotipunj. Along with his association with the legal world, he devoted himself to nation-building. He played a pivotal role in strengthening the RSS across Gujarat. Such was Madhukarrao Ji's passion towards nation-building that it groomed his son, Mohanrao, to work towards India's regeneration. It is as if Parasmani Madhukarrao prepared another Parasmani in Mohanrao.

Mohan Ji became a Pracharak in the mid-1970s. Upon hearing the word 'Pracharak', one may mistakenly think it refers to someone who is simply doing Prachar or campaigning, propagating ideas. But, those familiar with the working of the RSS understand that the Pracharak tradition is at the core of the organisation's work. Over the last hundred years, thousands of young people, inspired by a patriotic zeal, have left their homes and families to dedicate their lives to realising the mission of India First.

His early years in the RSS coincided with a very dark period of Indian history. This was the time the draconian Emergency was imposed by the then



Congress government. For every person who cherished democratic principles and wanted India to prosper, it was natural to strengthen the anti-Emergency movement. This is exactly what Mohan Ji and countless RSS Swayamsevaks did. He worked extensively in rural and backward areas of Maharashtra, especially Vidarbha. This shaped his understanding of the challenges faced by the poor and downtrodden.

Over the years, Bhagwat Ji held various positions in the RSS. He performed each and every one of those duties with great dexterity. Mohan Ji's years as the head of the Akhil Bharatiya Sharirik Pramukh during the 1990s are still fondly remembered by many Swayamsevaks. During this period, he spent considerable time working in the villages of Bihar. These experiences further deepened his connect with grassroots issues. He became Akhil Bharatiya Prachar Pramukh at the turn of the 20th century. In 2000, he became the Sarkaryawah and here too, he brought his unique way of working, handling the most complex of situations with ease and precision. In 2009, he became the Sarsanghchalak and continues to work with great vibrancy.

Being Sarsanghchalak is more than an organisational responsibility. Extraordinary individuals have defined this role through personal sacrifice, clarity of purpose and unshakable commitment to Maa Bharti. Mohan Ji, in addition to doing full justice to the enormity of the responsibility, has also brought to it his own strength, intellectual depth and empathetic leadership, all of which is inspired by the principle of Nation First. If I can think of two attributes Mohan Ji has held close to his heart and imbibed

in his work style, they are continuity and adaptation. He has always steered the Organisation through very complex currents, never compromising on the core ideology we are all proud of and at the same time addressing the evolving needs of society. He has a natural connect with the youth and thus, has always focussed on integrating more youngsters with the Sangh Parivar. He is often seen engaging in public discourse and interacting with people, which has been very beneficial in today's dynamic and digital world.

Broadly speaking, Bhagwat Ji's tenure will be considered the most transformative period in the 100-year journey of the RSS. From the change in uniform to the modifications in the Shiksha Vargs (training camps), several significant changes occurred under his leadership.

I particularly remember Mohan Ji's efforts during the COVID period, when humanity battled a once in a lifetime pandemic. In those times, continuing the traditional RSS activities became challenging. Mohan Ji suggested increased usage of technology. In the context of the global challenges, he remained connected with global perspectives while developing institutional frameworks.

At that time, all Swayamsevaks made every possible effort to reach out to those in need, while ensuring the safety of themselves and others. Medical camps were organised in several places. We also lost many of our hardworking Swayamsevaks, but such was the inspiration of Mohan Ji that their determination never wavered.

Earlier this year, during the inauguration of the Madhav Netra Chikitsalaya in Nagpur, I had remarked that the RSS is like an Akshayavat, an eternal banyan

tree that energises the national culture and collective consciousness of our nation. The roots of this Akshayavat are deep and strong because they are anchored in values. The dedication with which Mohan Bhagwat Ji has committed himself to nurturing and advancing these values is truly inspirational.

Another admirable quality of Mohan Ji's personality is his soft-spoken nature. He is blessed with an exceptional ability to listen. This trait ensures a deeper perspective and also brings a sense of sensitivity and dignity to his persona and leadership.

Here, I also want to write about the keen interest he has always shown towards various mass movements. From Swachh Bharat Mission to Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, he always urges the entire RSS family to add vigour through these movements. In order to further social well-being, Mohan Ji has given the 'Panch Parivartan', which includes social harmony, family values, environmental awareness, national selfhood and civic duties. These can inspire Indians from all walks of life. Every Swayamsevak dreams of seeing a strong and prosperous nation. To realise this dream, what is required is both clear vision and decisive action. Mohan Ji embodies both these qualities in abundance.

Bhagwat Ji has always been a strong votary of 'Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat', a firm believer in India's diversity and the celebration of so many different cultures and traditions that are a part of our land.

Beyond his busy schedule, Mohan Ji has always found time to pursue passions like music and singing. Few people know that he is very versatile in various Indian musical instruments. His passion for reading can be seen in several of his speeches and interactions.

This year, in a few days from now, the RSS turns 100. It is also a pleasant coincidence that this year, Vijaya Dashami, Gandhi Jayanti, Lal Bahadur Shastri Jayanti and the RSS centenary celebrations are on the same day.

It will be a historic milestone for lakhs of people associated with the RSS in India and the world. And, we have a very wise and hardworking Sarsanghchalak in Mohan Ji, steering the organisation in these times.

I will conclude by saying that Mohan Ji is a living example of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, showing that when we rise above boundaries and consider everyone as our own, it strengthens trust, brotherhood and equality in society. I once again wish Mohan Ji a long and healthy life in service of Maa Bharti.

(The writer is Prime Minister of India)

Sainik Colony Jammu: A community at war with itself

■ COL SHIV CHOUDHARY (RETD)

Once envisioned as a model settlement reflecting the pride, discipline, and shared ethos of India's defence community, Sainik Colony in Jammu today is drifting dangerously away from its founding ideals. What was meant to be a self-sustaining, well-organized township for serving and retired military personnel now reflects internal decay; not just infrastructural, but moral and communal. The tragedy lies not in the absence of plans or resources, but in a collective erosion of willpower, cooperation, and civic responsibility. At the heart of this decline is a troubling paradox: a colony built for those who once lived by discipline now struggles under the weight of entitlement and apathy. The very residents who should have been its stewards have, in many ways, become passive spectators or active contributors to its unravelling.

The original blueprint of Sainik Colony included spacious homes, wide roads, parks, a school, healthcare space, and commercial zones; hallmarks of a thriving residential ecosystem. But that vision now suffers under a growing culture of blame, incorrect actions and inaction. Residents demand services but show little interest in supporting or participating in the systems that deliver them. Meetings go unattended, volunteerism is rare, and civic engagement has been reduced to complaints and WhatsApp forwards. The management committee elected by the residents themselves is treated less like a representative body and more like a scapegoat for everything that doesn't work. While people hurl accusations freely, few step forward with real solutions, ideas, or effort are the need.

The spirit of cooperation has been replaced by confrontation. The courtroom has become the default venue for resolving even minor disputes. Endless legal cases are pending in various courts, many related to encroachments, illegal constructions, faulty allotments, habitual defiance of rules, and other property conflicts. Disputes that could be easily resolved through dialogue and compromise are dragged into prolonged litigation. Stay orders are used not as a last resort but as weapons to stall development. These legal proceedings, instead of serving justice, often delay progress and foster deep resentment. No court can enforce mutual respect or community spirit. That must come from within.

Signs of decline are all around. Land occupied by houses since 1973 faces challenges of ownership. A school once intended as a beacon of academic excellence lies in neglect. Land earmarked for a hospital is either misused or lies vacant. A major shopping complex remains stalled under litigation. Parks are barren, poorly maintained, or illegally occupied. Infrastructure suffers not just from budget constraints but from a fundamental lack of ownership, civic discipline, and community culture. When public spaces become nobody's responsibility, they quickly become everyone's burden.

Cleanliness, a basic measure of any functioning

society, is another casualty. Despite active and low-cost garbage collection, residents still dump waste in empty plots, road corners, and public spaces. Construction debris is left to rot for years. Shockingly, open defecation still continues. Those who raise objections are mocked or ignored. Campaigns like 'Clean, Green, and Fresh' fail-not due to poor planning but due to a complete absence of participation. Cleanliness is not a slogan; it's a daily habit and a shared commitment. Yet, many hide behind the argument that paying taxes absolves them of any further responsibility. This is a highly flawed and damaging belief.

Security is a growing concern, yet there is widespread resistance to even basic safety measures. With multiple open entry points, a transient tenant population, and unverified domestic help, anxiety is rising especially among seniors and families with children. CCTV installations and patrolling are the need of every house, but few residents are willing for them. What's worse is the reluctance to even verify tenants, report suspicious activity, or check unknown persons loitering in the area. The cost of basic security is endlessly debated; the cost of ignoring it is quietly endured by all.

Traffic and parking have become daily sources of frustration. Vehicles are parked randomly and road space is clogged with two-wheelers. Suggestions for order are ridiculed. Rule-followers are mocked while violators are excused or even celebrated. This chaos is not due to a lack of space, but a lack of discipline and collective thinking. Even compassion has been mismanaged. Stray animals roam freely, and often fed in public areas without planning. There is no sterilization program, no feeding zones, and no coordinated action from the authorities. The result is a risk of accidents, hygiene risks, damage to plants.

Financial contribution is perhaps the clearest indicator of the mindset within the colony. Despite the lowest maintenance charges among organized colonies in India, nearly 80% of residents default. Ironically, many of these defaulters are the first to complain about potholes, unlit streets, drainage issues, or leaking pipes. Maintenance fees are not charity; they fund staff salaries, utilities, infrastructure upkeep, and legal support. Without these funds, nothing can operate. The question isn't 'what is the committee doing?' but 'why is the community refusing to invest in its own well-being?'

A toxic culture has recently emerged where new committee members are branded as corrupt, dictatorial, illiterate, divisive, or unworthy, often by those whose only aim is to occupy office for property-related interests. While every elected body must be held accountable, expecting miracles from an unsupported committee is both unrealistic and unjust. The committee is not the enemy. The real issue is the rising culture of entitlement without participation, and of criticism without contribution. Many residents refuse to remove illegal extensions, won't park responsibly, won't verify tenants, won't clear debris outside their

homes, or attend meetings. Sadly they remain loud in their condemnation of everything and everyone.

A small but vocal group of vested interests is the real estate speculators, politically driven disruptors, and opportunists. They flourish on such a fertile ground of mistrust. Their tactic is clear: discredit the committee, divide the community, paralyze progress, and eventually create a leadership vacuum they can exploit. And in a largely silent colony, their voices echo loudest. Misinformation, whisper campaigns, and social media manipulation are tools in their arsenal. They discourage genuine initiatives, mock positive actions, and actively suppress constructive communication. Their influence must be recognized, challenged, and firmly rejected; not with counter-conflict but with clarity, transparency, and collective resolve.

The problems facing Sainik Colony are deep, but not irreversible. What's needed isn't massive budgets or sweeping reforms, it's a change in mindset. Rebuilding this colony begins not with cement, gates or hits on social media, but with values: individual discipline, cooperation, mutual support, respect for rules, and shared responsibility. Every resident must stop thinking like a consumer and start behaving like a stakeholder. Progress won't come from court orders, social media battles, loud protests or anti management propaganda; it will come from quiet, consistent, everyday action, paying dues, attending meetings, following rules, verifying tenants, participating in cleanliness drives, and above all treating this colony like a home worth preserving.

Imagine, even for a moment, if the management office ceases to exist tomorrow. Who would address complaints? Who would represent collective interests in court or government offices? Who would coordinate repairs and maintenance, pursue power and water-related grievances, organize cleanups, or resolve disputes? The answer is clear: chaos would prevail. And that's exactly the scenario some disruptive forces are hoping for. But that future is not inevitable. A management committee alone cannot solve the problem. A renewed and clear commitment from all residents can.

The real question isn't 'What is the colony becoming?' but rather 'What am I doing to improve it?' Because the future of Sainik Colony will not be defined by slogans, gamesor scheming against elected body, but by collective actions. Real change starts not with the next election, but with the next decision to care, to contribute, to clean, to cooperate, and to commit.

Present management committee is firmly on track and would maintain direction and drive for betterment of entire colony irrespective of any disruption and distractions.

The residents, collectively and surely can only transform this colony. Indeed, the transformation is inevitable.

(The writer is a motivational speaker and a change-maker).

Listening to Silent Teacher: a new vision for education

■ SHONIMA MALHOTRA

Nature is a great teacher. Undoubtedly it is a great preacher.

It is only that we humans need to acknowledge its significance.

And not commit the grave mistake of undermining its utmost relevance.

The essence of teaching doesn't stop at the blackboard; it is not limited to lectures or notes; it is not confined to the walls of a classroom. The times we live in bring us in direct interface with a simple yet profound truth: the most important lessons are no longer found only in classrooms or textbooks. We need to learn from nature and from the wisdom that surrounds us if only we pause to listen.

We are all familiar with the timeless story of the old farmer and his three sons. When they constantly quarreled, the farmer did not choose heavy words or lengthy sermons. Instead, he turned to nature. He used a simple bundle of sticks to teach them that unity gives strength, while division brings weakness. The sticks did not speak, yet they carried a message more powerful than any lecture. In their silence, nature became the teacher. This story is not only about family bonds - it is also about our relationship with nature. Today, the story feels even more relevant. Nature has been showering us with abundance for centuries. But instead of showing gratitude and reverence, we have chosen enroachment and exploitation in the name of development. And now, when nature strikes back - with floods, landslides, cloudbursts, and devastation - it is, in a way, teaching us a hard lesson. They are warnings that just like the bundle of sticks, if we work in unity with nature, we remain strong, secure, and nurtured. But if we break this bond and separate ourselves from the rhythm of nature, then we too shall break - fragile, vulnerable, and helpless. When we disrupt that unity, nature reminds us - often with painful force. Survival alone is an instinct; it keeps life going. But survival without compassion is mere existence; with compassion, it becomes coexistence and a shared journey. Nature shows us this truth at every step. It teaches us unity in diversity, balance in coexistence, and the strength that comes from harmony. A forest stands tall because every tree holds the soil together. A tree sur-

vives storms not by standing alone, but because its roots are interwoven with the roots of others, silently exchanging nourishment. When we deny compassion - whether to animals, to nature, or even to one another - we disturb the harmony that sustains life. Societies that push away the weak, the voiceless, or the different eventually create deeper wounds that threaten everyone.

Recently, our highest court passed a ruling about stray dogs. Initially, the plan was to put all stray dogs into shelters. But this approach, though practical on the surface, was met with concern for being inhumane and disruptive. Removing dogs entirely would have disturbed the urban ecosystem. At the same time, it also overlooked another quality that nature teaches us every day - empathy. To confine them all would have been to deny their place, their dignity, and the empathy that sustains coexistence. By revising its decision, the Court not only acknowledged ecological balance but also honored this deeper lesson from nature: that survival is incomplete without compassion. This decision mirrors nature's way - not to erase, but to regulate; not to dominate, but to balance; not to exclude, but to coexist. Much like the farmer's bundle of sticks, it reminds us that strength comes from harmony-with nature and society-not control. All play a role in keeping the cycle of life complete. Stray dogs, for instance, are not just mouths to be fed; they are also protectors of balance in the ecosystem and companions who remind us of loyalty and trust. To deny them compassion would weaken the very harmony that helps us all survive. Nature itself would have resisted this attempt to erase.

Nature speaks to us every single day, teaching us in ways both profound and quiet, showing us lessons of resilience, coexistence, balance, and compassion. And they are the ultimate lessons of teaching. We need to learn from the silent teacher around us - nature itself - which continues to guide, caution, and inspire us, if only we are willing to listen. Time has come for us to reimagine education - not just as the pursuit of academic excellence, but as the cultivation of wisdom, empathy, and responsibility.

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