# LITERACY: A SEARCH FOR CORRELATES

*Amare Asgedom**

**Abstract**

*A review of literature of development processes in Developing Nations shows that litertacy has often been associated with indicators of the process of modernization. This study attempts to examine the correlartes of literacy in the Ethiopian context. A survey study of 200 household heads in the subdistrict of rural Bahir Dar was made to investigate the hypothesized relationship. The results suggest mixed relationships. Literacy is not necessarily, a correlate of the variables; technification, innovativeness, cosmopolitannes and dislocation. Economic status was found a negative correlate of literacy. Exposure to the mass media, educational aspiration, and conscientization were, however, identified as significant positive correlates.*

The debate on the effects of literacy in development remains unresolved. McLuhan (17,18) asserted that literacy has brought "linear" thinking in all sciences, self centeredness in man, fragmentation in society, chauvenism, detachment, hierarchical organization and bureaucratization. Verne (33) argued that literacy brings a "dispossession" of speech by giving the illiterate the impression that books are the only possible vector of culture, and teach him to devalue the importance of his own discourse in his own eyes.

The German Adult Education Association (Deutscher Volksshouchul-Verban E. V.) (32) recently reported that there was no historical evidence that literacy in historical terms was a prerequisite of economic and social development." Literacy was not a prerequisite for intelligent understanding and handling of life. "Literacy and intelligence are contextbound" (P.4).

The Association emphasized that nonliterate societies have produced indigenous values and techniques for the satisfaction of basic needs and human enrichment and that literacy endeavors can have a destructive effect, such as the indirect negative influences and repercussions on development processes which are apparent in phenomena like rural exodus, negligence of traditional skills and cultural heritages bound to nonwritten transfer from generation to generation. Katz (13) also reported that literacy aligned with "modernism" has brought about a discontinuity of indigenous authentic cultures.

The advocates of literacy, however, depending on their area of interest, have attached much importance to it. Media scientists argue that since information flows through the media anyway, the importance of information flowing from the print media should not be neglected. The nonprint media cannot communicate all kinds of information. Another argument is that illiteracy supports the spread of misinformation since messages have been known to get distorted anywhere from 29 to 50 percent depending upon the complexity of the message when handled by illiterates (1).

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Bhola (2) has indentified two major positive effects of literacy; cognitive and social. The cognitive effects result from sheer cultivation of the ability to encode and decode a language irrespective of what is read. The social effects relate to the realignment of status, economic and power relationships, and to the develoment of mutual expecations that follow once the new literate has been initiated into the circle of the literate.

Development theorists have often said that literacy means higher income for the new literate. They insisted on the importance of quality human capital in breaking the cycle of poverty (13). Chaudhri (7) has recently found a relationship between farm worker's education and agricultural productivity, adoption of innovations (high yielding variety seeds, use of chemical fertilizers, etc.) and effective cooperatives in Punjab and Haryana.

To modernists, literacy is a modernizing variable, it creates "empathy" the ability of an individual to project himself into the role of another person (14, 15,24, 25). Lerner in the 1960s (14,15) viewed literacy as a correlate of empathy, mass media exposure, urbanization, economic participation (per capita income), and political participation (vote). He also asserted that literacy is a precondition to motivate people for media consumption. "People who read, usually do read, they consume more of audiovisual products and participate fully in the various activities of their society".

Rogers (24,25) listed four major attributes of literacy, (1) extending the experience of the individual, (2) permit the individual receiver to control the rate of message input, (3) literates can restore and retrieve print information for delayed use and (4) literacy unlocks certain mental abilites such as symbol manipulation.

There are very few studies on the correlates of literacy in Ethiopia. Dr. Aregay Waktola (34), in his study of diffusion and adoption of agricultural innovations in Chilalo found a positve correlation between exposure and adoption behavior. Another study was made by Margareta and Sjostram (29). Their study focussed on literacy campaign waged by the «Yem,israch Dimts» Mission Church (UDLC) since 1970. The major concern was the religious content. They reported that subjects in Gidole, Nejo, Addis Ababa and Dessie centers were found to be successful in breaking the code of alphabets, writing, arithmetic and reading comprehension. A UNESCO report (3) on the Ethiopian literacy campaigns has shown that literacy has brought about a positive attitude toward education. The National Literacy Coordinating Committee also reported that the campaign had a great impact in increasing the rate of enrollment in primary schools (20).

But recent rural studies have cited that Third World rural communications (including literacy) had, in many cases, dysfunctional effects on development. They have disturbed the rural economic structure by encouraging rural exodus and facilitating peasant dislocation (27,8,19,23). They have also been known in widening the gap between the information-rich and information-poor segments of the peasant population depending on peasant characteristics, such as, socio-economic status, cosmopolitanness, aspirations, conscientization, technification, age, etc. Rural communication's emphasis in the Third World was on technification (adoption of agricultural and health information) with little regard to conscientization (adoption of political information). Technification without conscientization renders the peasant more dependent on forces that he does not understand, argued Friere (p. 20). Sheer technology transfer, according to him, is not necessarily equivalent to genuine human and social developm-ent, and it can be detrimental (p. 20).

**Development**

The concept of Development has, however, been viewed in different ways. This paper will review only development models that implicate literacy either as a positive or negative contributary factor.

**(a) Development in the Form of Modernization**

The focus of modernization is psychic change, that is discarding «traditionalism» and instilling «empathy» in its place (14). This theory describes the process of modernization in terms of four variables: urbanization, literacy, mass media exposure and political participation. It centered around the criteria of rate of economic growth, capital intensive technology and quantification, centeralized planning, etc. (24). It also assumed the strategy of social «differentiation»--the rising and accentuation of social classes capable of advancing the growth process-- and «integration»-- a social harmoy of classes within a political system (21), an advocacy of a capitalist system. Socio economic benefits were assumed in the end, to trickle down to the masses (24).

Weiner in 1966 (35) defined development as «enactment of valuses» saying that attitudinal and value changes are prerequisites to creating a modern society, economy and political system. This strategy was very much emphasized by social psychologists and it centered on the primacy of ideas in society (22). The theory was characterized by the belief that values, motives, or psychological forces determine ultimately the rate of economic and social development.

**(b) Dependency Theory**

This perspective views development as liberation from dependency. The argument is that «development» and «underdevelopment» are not two different stages in the history of mankind but integral parts of the same «world economy» (22). Thus the forms that social poverty and economic stagnation take in the Third World at present are largely creations of the process of capitalist world expansion. The structuring of the world into «Core» and «Periphery» regions creates an international division of labor where the core regions are producers and the peripheries consumers of produts of the «developed world» (23).

**(c) Systems Approach**

Teheranian (30) defines development in terms of «Systems»-- a dialectical process in which sequences, lags and contradictions vary from society to society. He recognizes the unique problem of Developing Nations. In these countries communication revolution exceeded economic revolution and national integration. This raised demands for more modernity than can be delivered and has resulted in revolution of rising frustrations. Teheranian views development of human societies as «systems» which might pursue different routes and have different destinations. As each moves along the path of development it can define and redefine its route and destination. The process of development for each social system, Teheranian says, is setting one's own image of the future in terms of one's own perceived needs.

**(d) Development as Cultural Synthesis**

This theory hypothesizes that cultural values cannot be truely carried out from one society to another in their basic forms. Itagaki (28) elucidated the nature of cultural contact between civilizations as obeying the laws of cultural «radiation» and «reception», during the contact: only the most trivial strands are transmitted. This theory advocates a cultural synthesis which is possible through the emergence of some dynamic force or creative movement from within the society concerned, or through «electism»-- a new synthesis of culture by renovating one's own traditional value system and combining it with the values of foreign culture. The foreign culture, however, is to be adopted in the context of «soil improvement» and not «in the form of implantation or transplantation.» In the same vein, Schumacher (27) argues for an integration of the two sectors of the dual economy of Developing Nations. He observes that any successful development in the cities destroys the economic structure of the hinterland and the hinterland revenges by mass migration into the cities. The rural sector should be the beneficiary of all national investments.

**Literacy — Definition** There is a general lack of commonly accepted standard defintion of literacy. Literacy, in one sense, can merely be concerned with the acquisition of the skills of writing, reading and dealing with elementary arithmetic (6). It can be regarded as an end in itself (11). In 1951 UNESCO considered a person literate one who could read and write a simple statement on his everyday life (12). The other notion of literacy is the principle of functionality. It connotes the practical application of reading and writing; the functionally literate should be able to write a simple instruction leaflet and write a legible letter (12). One would, therefore, consider reading and writing as central to both perspectives. The major difference, however, lies in the aims of reading and writing. One treats literacy as a perspective the ohter treates it as an integral part of development processes (6). Abilities of reading, writing and solving arithmetical problems of all kinds are used (in this paper) to define literacy.

The purpose of this study is to explore the meaning (functionality or dysfunctionality) of literacy in the Ethiopian context in terms of the correlates: economic status, age, innovativeness, cosmopolitanness, empathy, aspirations, conscientization, techinification, media exposure and geographic dislocation.

**Oprational Definition of Concepts**

1 **Literacy** is operationalized by the average score attained from test results of reading ,writing and arithmetic skills. The investigator, depending on the experiences of Roger's model (24,25) and the criteria set by the Ethiopian Data Collection, Supervision and Certification committee of the literacy campaigns (DCSCC) has designed the following scheme: (a) reading skill was determined by asking the respondents to read six sentences that vary in size from one-word sentence to six-word sentences .Words are also made to vary in size with a minimum number of two alphabets and a maximum of nine. Sentences were arranged on the basis of level of complexity (from simple to complex). Scores were determined by the number of correctly read words. (b) writing skill was operationalized by a score obtained from asking respondents to write the name of one person in their respective neighborhoods. Scores were obtained on the basis of correct writing of alphabets. A five - point differntial scale was used for scoring. The problem of intercoder reliability was dealt by repeated practice until some level of uniformity was attained

(an intercoder reliability coefficient of 0.92 was ultimately achieved among four coders): (c) The measure of arithmetic skills employed by the DCSSC was adopted with little modification . In addition one problem-solving question was given to inquire their comprehension. Questions ranged from simple to complex, again. Scoring was determined by the weighted value of each question.

2/ **Innovativeness** - The word «innovate» according to Webster's New Word dictionary is defined as (a) (vi), to introduce new methods, devices ,etc. (2) (vt), to bring in as an innovation. The definition of Innovative, according to the same source, is - -characterized by, or tending to, or introducting innovations. Innovativeness, is the extent to which an individual is innovative . In diffusion of innovations, the spread of the innovation over time varies from person to person. Some people are early adopters: some are late; some are even diehards, they resist the change. From this perspective, Rogers (24,25) and Lerner (14,15) defined innovativeness as the degree to which an individual is earlier in adoption of innovations . In this paper innovativeness is operationally defined as the degree to which an individual is earlier in adopting five rural innovations: use of chemical fertilizers, use of boiled water seeking advice from rural health agents, use of selected seeds and improved farming tools. These innovations were selected on the principle of low cost and their frequency of appearance in the various media.

3/ **Cosmopolitanness** is the frequency of geographic mobility and social contact of the individual outside his village (frequency of contact with change agents and frequency of travel to the nearest town).

4/ **Technification** is operationally defined by five agricultural-knowledge and five health-knowledge questions.

5/ **Conscientization** is defined by five political knowledge questions.

4/ **Aspiration** is the educational level an individual aspires for one's self and for the oldest son or daughter.

7/ **Empathy** is the kind of job (urban or rural) one aspires in the future. Only types of jobs are identified; quantitative treatment is avoided in this case.

8/ **Mass Media Exposure** is the amount of exposure to any of the mass media. Self-report responses as to how many days in a week, month, year, the audience listen to the radio, read print (newspaprers, books, magazines, pamphlets, etc.) were taken as measuring tools.

9/ **Geographic Dislocation** is preference of a ruralite to live in the already existing towns, the larger the town of preference the higher the dislocation.

10/ **Economic Status** is size of land in «Timad» owned by the respondent.

**Sampling and Data Collection**

The survey method was used for data collection. A sample size of 200 households was randomly selected from a rural subdistrict, Bahir Dar (It excludes any membership in urban Bahir Dar or membership in Urban Dweller's Association). Out of the 15,850 households (registered in the subdistrict's peasant Association) only household heads were selected assuming that household heads are the most active in the decision making process of the family. The list of membership of the Subdistrict's Peasant Association was used for selecting the respondents. The names of people in the peasant Association File were not arranged according to any identifiable order. To

avoid any uncertainty, however, the investigator decided to take every 80th member from the list of 15,800 households. It, however, happened that more than 50 percent of the respondents were selected from the settlement areas of Woramit, Andassa, Dishet Gordoma, etc. The rest were evenly distributed in the various villages.

A questionnaire (prepared in Amharic) with two sets of questions was prepared and administered in two rounds. The first Round covered administration of the literacy tests. The second Round was concerned with administration of the bulk of questions (about 70). A total number of 10 interviewers with educational level of 12th grade (completed) and who had participated in the May 1984 National census took part in the process. All interviewers were given an intensive training (by the researcher) for one week. They identified the respective peasant association and residence of the respondent when collecting the data. Each interviewer read all questions to the respondent. The total time to collect the information was about five weeks (July 20 to August 30, 1984).

All the 200 sets of questionnaires were returned as would be expected from personal interviews. Only nine were later discarded for incompleteness. The discarded ones had some of their pages missed or some of the questions unanswered. The data was then coded into digital language. The processing took place in the Computer Center of the Addis Ababa University in early September 1984. The programming was based on The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), and it specifically focused on the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Pearsonian Correlation Coefficient.

**Results**

Nine variables were quantitatively tested to relate to literacy. The analysis of the relationship of job aspirations (empathy) with literacy has, however, been made qualitative because of a problem that inheres in quantifying type of jobs. Table I depicts the correlation matrix of all ten variables including literacy.

The results suggest three different relationships with literacy: (1) mass media exposure, educational aspiration and conscientization were found significantly and positively related to literacy. (2) economic status as measured by size of land holding significantly but negatively correlated with literacy, (3) technification, innovativeness, cosmopolitaness, and dislocation were found totally unrelated to literacy. The relationship of age with literacy was also found to be insignificant.

**Discussion**

**1.1 Mass Media Exposure**

A further probe was made to identify which medium most correlates

**Table I**

**Correlation Matrix of Modernizing Variables**

| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Literacy | 1 | 100 | | | | | | | | |
| 2. | Econom. Status | 2 | -.42* | 100 | | | | | | | |
| 3. | Age | 3 | -.15 | .58* | 100 | | | | | | |
| 4. | Innovativeness | 4 | .14 | -.10 | .11 | 100 | | | | | |
| 5. | Cosmopolitaness | 5 | -.12 | -.04 | -.11 | .01 | 100 | | | | |
| 6. | Technification | 6 | .17 | .10 | .18 | .21 | .12 | 100 | | | |
| 7. | Conscientization | 7 | .45 | .20 | .06 | .20 | .13 | .07 | 100 | | |
| 8. | Mass Media Expo | 8 | .58 | -.28 | .11 | .15 | .23 | .21 | .50* | 100 | |
| 9. | Ed. Aspiraton | 9 | .54* | -.59* | .30 | .18 | .04 | .24 | .23 | .28 | 100 |
| 10. | Dislocation | 10 | -.09 | .39 | -.27 | -.09 | .01 | .05 | .14 | .15 | .28 | 100 |

*Significantiy different from zero at the less than one percent level of probability ($P \leq 0.001$), N=191

**Table II**

**Correlation Matrix of Media Components**

| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Literacy | 1 | 100 | | | | | |
| Radio list. | 2 | .29 | 100 | | | | |
| Radio ownership | 3 | .16 | .70* | 100 | | | |
| Newspapers & Maga. | 4 | .60* | .09 | .24 | 100 | | |
| Books | 5 | .65* | .30 | .45* | .86* | 100 | |
| Mass Media | 6 | .58 | .33 | .62* | .75* | .77* | 100 |

$P < 0.001$, N= 191

A cross-correlation of the various mass media (with the exception of television) with literacy reflects the general correlation pattern between literacy and the overall mass media exposure. A ranking of the correlation coefficients shows that exposure to books loads the highest (see Table II). Newspapers and other print are the next important correlates.

Radio listening was found to be less related to literacy. Explanations were sought in the radio saturation rate of the region. Only 24 of the 191 respondents had radio sets, a figure lower than the saturation rate of the nation--three million radio sets (9). It was also found that radio ownership was associated with listening but unassociated with literacy. Group-listening behaviour rather than private-listening was also observed as more frequent.

### 1.2. Educational Aspiration

It was found that educational aspiration was a close correlate of literacy. The data also suggest that the mean score for educational aspiration was 72 percent indicating that most respondents had a high level of educational aspirations. Fifty percent of them wanted their elder sons or daughters to complete college while 38 percent mentioned secondary education. The remaining 12 percent indicated grades below 12.

### 1.3. Conscientization

To investigate the level of political consciousness and its relation to level of literacy in the subdistrict of Bahir Dar, five political-knowledge questions were used. An examination of the mean values and the values of the coefficient of variation suggest that the scores of subejcts on these questions were reletively high, 73 and 45 percent respectively. The correlation analysis results with literacy indicated that there was a substantial positive relationship ($r=0.45$, at 0.99 significant level, or $P<0.001$). Conscientization as it is indicated in Table I is also found to be a close correlate of mass media exposure ($r=0.58$, $P<0.001$).

This finding is valid in terms of the high political mobilization of the Ethiopian masses since the Revolution. Discussion forums, the mass media, posters and wall sheets have been disseminating political information tailored to peasant audiences. Peasants were made to participate in the local election proesses of the various mass organizations. During the literacy campaigns, similar political messages have been disseminated through text books and through the change agency of political cadres, production cadres and others. Despite the high degree of redundancy of the information in the various media, the most literate was found to be having a high level of political awareness. Although the causal arrow cannot be determined in this study, conscientization was found to be a close correlate of literacy in the subdistrict of rural Bahir Dar.

### 1.4. Economic Status

Economic status was found to be a negative correlate of literacy. The observed negative relationship between literacy and economic status is a negation of previous studies (e.g. 24, 25, 14, 15) that defined literacy as a function of economic status along with other factors.

Since economic imperatives were not important for a person to be literate in the Ethiopian context, the relationship seems to be the reverse. Farmers with smaller plots of land tended to benefit more than farmers with larger plots. The poorer might view literacy as a means to meeting its economic aspirations. Peasants with larger plots of land might not perceive literacy as a means to further economic ends. It was also found that the aged had larger plots than the young. The aged who are also found to be relatively the rich may not see literacy as a means to satisfying their aspiration. These hypotheses, however, require further testing.

### 2. Technification, Innovativeness, Cosmopolitanness, Empathy and Dislocation

Studies by Lerner (14,15), Rogers (24,25), etc., had shown that, technification, innovativeness, cosmopolitanness and urbanization were found to be typical of mo-

dernizing peasants in Third World countries. These factors were assumed to be close correlates of literacy. The study in the subdistrict of rural Bahir Dar, however, showed to the contrary. Literacy was not a close correlate of these factors.

Knowledge on health and knowledge of agricultural innovations were used for operationalizing technification. The questions about technification were prepared on prior assessment of the content of the media and teaching materials used in the literacy campaign. It was hypothesized that agricultural and health informartion would highly diffuse because they were assumed to be one of the most important concerns of the peasantry. Literacy was expected to facilitate the diffusion of agricultural and health innovations. The results showed to the contrary. The estimation of mean scores and coeffient of variation suggests very low scores, 45 and 13 respectively.

Examination of how the people acquire their knowledge on the specific agricultural and health ideas necessitated the assessment of the various channels through which these innovations flow. Respondents were asked to trace the sources of information. They were found to be unable to trace the sources of 36 percent of the information.

Of the known 64 percent was attributable to various sources, and of this, only 10 percent was attributed to interpersonal channels. The remaining 90 precent came from other sources. One, therefore, makes the hypothesis that the low scores in technification are ascribed partly to failures in maxmizing the interpersonal channel (social network) as the major medium of communication. It, howevere requires further probe to test this hypothesis.

Peasant characteristics, such as, innovativeness (earliness in adoption of rural innovations) and cosmopolitannes (frequency of contact and movement out of the village) were found to be irrelevant to literacy in the subdistrict of rural Bahir Dar, a fact which contradicts previous findings in societies where the market laws are predominant.

To measure the tendency for geographic dislocation, preference of settlement was taken as an indicator. Geographic dislocation was defined as preference to live in urban areas. Any other type of movement within rural areas, including modern settlement villages in the rural areas was not taken as an indicator of dislocation in this study.

The results suggest an existence of a high tendency to migrate to urban areas. Almost all respondents (96 percent) preferred to live in the twon of Bahirdar or in other large town of the country. The correlation coefficient of literacy and dislocation was very low (r=.09) suggesting lack of association between the two. Geographic dislocation was therefore, a typical characteristic of Bahirdar peasants irrespective of other peasant characteristics: such as, level of literacy, mass media exposure, economic status, etc. Literacy did not deter or reinforce preference of settlement in towns.

To probe into the issue of the motivations of settlement preferences, one open-ended question was given to the respondents asking them to indicate the kind of job they would prefer to have in the furture for themselves and for their children. Five Professions were overwhelmingly empathized. These were: to be a teacher, medical doctor or health worker, administrator, pilot and farmer.

The percentage distrbution of their job choices shows a very high bias of urban orientation. Forthy-Five percent of all respondents said they liked to be school teachers, 20 percent administrators, 19 percent medical doctors or health workers, five percent pilots, and only four percent farmers. Seven percent gave no response.

The distribution of type of empathy on the basis of levels of literacy shows a similar pattern. Table lll demonstrates the relationship of literacy with type of job choices.

**Table lll**

**Relationship of Literacy**

**With Job Aspiration**

| Literacy Scores in % | Teacher % | M. Doctor & % | Administ-rator % | Farmer % | Pilot % | No Respo |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0-24 | 56 | 13 | 25 | 4 | 0 | 2 |
| 25-49 | 47 | 20 | 20 | 3 | 7 | 3 |
| 50-100 | 40 | 22 | 19 | 3 | 6 | 10 |
| Total | 45 | 19 | 20 | 4 | 5 | 7 |

The literate, semiliterate and illiterate had very similar preferences in future professions, all urban oriented. It can therefore, be argued that job aspiration does not correlate, at all, with level of literacy.

The job aspirations, primarily intended to show the reasons for dislocation, have corroborated the fact that the tendency for dislocation is very high but not affected by literacy. Only four percent of the respondents wanted to remain farmers.

There is a great need for future research to focus on the problem of dislocation. Rural communications may also need to discourage raising of unviable aspirations that may be one of the causes of rural exodus.

## CONCLUSIONS

An examination of the correlates of literacy tentatively tend to suggest results hitherto hardly known to development communicators. Whereas literacy has been known to correlate positively with the variables; economic status, innovativeness, cosmopolitanness, urbanization, knowledgeability, etc., the study in the subdistrict of rural Bahir Dar has demonstrated different results.

Economic Status was found negatively related to level of literacy, a result contrary to that in "market economies." The study suggests that economic imperatives; were irrelevant, in fact, they seem to be negative stimulants in the Ethiopian condition. The characteristics of innovativeness, cosmopolitanness, empathy, technification, etc. were found irrelavant to literacy. Only educational aspirations, mass media exposure and conscientization were found to be significant correlates of literacy.

Unviable aspirations and geographic dislocation were some of the major development problems identified in the sudistrict of rural Bahir Dar. Even these were unrelated to literacy. The two characteristics were found to be rampant in most peasants irrespective of variations in individual behavioral characteristics.

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