

Tata Computer-based Functional Literacy Program

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India, a rapidly growing economy, having recorded 19% reduction in poverty over a decade, still has poor literacy rate with around 400 million people unable to read and write. Fakir Chand Kohli, widely regarded as the father of India's software industry challenged the software application reduction in literacy rates. The project poses great potential for improvement of women literacy. (54% women are literate as compared to 76% men)

“Launched in February 2000 in the Beeramguda village in Medak district of Andhra Pradesh, this ground-breaking project seeks to combat illiteracy with a new approach to learning, using multimedia and flashcards to fortify the learning experience”. The Computer-Based Functional Literacy (CBFL) method, primarily focused on reading, is designed to provide a basic 300-500 word vocabulary to adults over the course of 40 hours – ‘about a third of the time of traditional training’, and essentially based on the theories of cognition, language and communication.

A typical class has between 15 and 20 people and is held in the evening hours. CBFL curriculum provides flexibility to adjust to the varied schedules of working adults with families, and does not require trained teachers. A detailed analysis of CFBL is given here and the pictures here.

““You don't need a state of the art computer for this program to really fly,” says Tata Group Chairman Ratan N. Tata, which means that the training can be conducted on donated 486 Pentium computers deemed obsolete by many users but adequate for CBFL.”

Today the CBFL project is operational in more than 1,000 centers in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, and it has helped more than 50,000 people learn the most basic reading. More centers are in the process of being set up. CBFL has been field tested in five of India's 18 languages — Telegu, Tamil, Hindi, Marathi, and Bengali, with the help of government and NGOs in various locations throughout India. Tata claims that if implemented properly, the project can make 90 per cent of India literate in three to five years, thereby transforming the third world workforce.

CBFL has even been exported to South Africa, thanks to the interest of First Lady Zanele Mbeki. A TCS team is helping experts in that country to map the sounds of unwritten South African languages and develop a script for use in computer-based literacy training.

A similar program previously implemented in Nagrota Surian in 2005 was ASHA which aimed at teaching 15000 adults how to read and write in a period of 3 years.