



# Access to Knowledge

Providing access to knowledge is the most fundamental way of increasing the opportunities and reach of individuals and groups. Therefore, means must exist for individuals who have the ability to receive and comprehend knowledge to readily obtain it. This also includes making accurate knowledge of the state and its activities available to the general public. Certain issues that are being examined in this context by the National Knowledge Commission are literacy, knowledge portals, networks and translation.

## Literacy

The National Literacy Mission (NLM) was initiated in 1988 with the objective of achieving a sustainable threshold level of 75 per cent functional literacy for non-literates in the 15-35 age group by 2007. It relied on mass mobilization through locally organized cultural and social events, and integrating literacy into a wider programme of mass social education and awareness. The 2001 Census indicates that the literacy level in the country has gone up to 65.38%, from 52.21 per cent in 1991. For the first time, the total number of non-literates has decreased in absolute terms from 329 million to 304 million during this decade. However, the national average masks enormous disparities, pockets of residual illiteracy and differentials based on factors such as region, caste, gender. These continue to be problematic and the total number of non-literates continues to be enormous. No country on its path to becoming a knowledge society can allow a sizeable proportion of its population to remain illiterate.

Literacy initiatives have to be re-invigorated to ensure that these problems can be tackled. In this context, NKC organized a brainstorming workshop on 'Literacy: Emerging Issues and Next Steps' in July 2006. Some of the issues discussed were:

- The framework of the National Literacy Mission
- Use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) based approaches in Literacy initiatives

- Development of relevant material and quality training of resource persons
- The role of Panchayat Institutions
- Convergence with the state developmental programmes and the setting up of community universities to codify people's knowledge systems.

Concurrent to this process, NKC initiated an independent evaluation of the Computer-Based Functional Literacy Programme developed by Tata Consultancy Services (TCS). The evaluation was undertaken during July 2006 by a team headed by Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), Kerala. The findings of the evaluation were considered at the workshop.

## Libraries

The role of libraries in providing widespread and inclusive access to knowledge is widely acknowledged. In today's context, a library has to play two distinct roles — to serve as a local centre of information and knowledge, and to be a local gateway to national and global knowledge. To achieve this goal, existing libraries must modernize their collections, services and facilities, become more pro-active, and collaborate with other institutions, agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in order to develop a community-based information system.

Recognizing that the Library and Information Services (LIS) sector needs immediate and sustained attention in order to fulfill its potential, NKC constituted a Working Group on Libraries, composed of experts in the area. The Working Group formulated its recommendations after holding extensive discussions with a wide range of professionals. NKC's recommendations on LIS were submitted to the Prime Minister in December 2006. The need to use modern information and communication technology to meet the changing needs of the LIS sector has been widely recognized. Some of the issues considered by NKC include institutional framework of libraries; networking;

LIS education, training and research; modernization and computerization of libraries; maintenance of private and personal collections, and staff requirements to meet changing needs.

## Translation

High quality translation is vital for increasing access to knowledge in many critical areas, and strengthening people's participation in education and the creation and dissemination of knowledge. However, the current facilities for translation are inadequate. There is both latent unrecognized demand and uneven availability of complete information. Therefore some amount of public intervention is crucial to encourage the translation industry in scope, scale and quality.

NKC submitted its recommendations to the Prime Minister on translation and the nature of public intervention needed in September 2006. There is a need to provide an impetus for developing translation, to establish a storehouse of information, to create and maintain various tools for translation and to provide for training and capacity building to develop a competent pool of translation experts. Towards these objectives, NKC has recommended the establishment of a National Translation Mission which will supervise and coordinate the initial public intervention in the area.

## Language

An inclusive society is the foundation for a knowledge society. Language is significant, not only as a medium of instruction or a means of communication but also as a determinant of access. In the current scenario, an understanding and command of the English language, is a most important determinant of access to higher education, employment possibilities and social opportunities. School-leavers who are not adequately trained in English as a language are always at a disadvantage in the world of higher education. There is an irony in this situation. English has been part of our education system for more than a century. Yet, English is beyond the reach of most of our young people. This makes for highly unequal access.

In this context, NKC engaged in informal consultations on this subject with a wide range of people in government, academia, media and industry including some chief ministers in the states, Members of Parliament, people in professions such as medicine and law, as well as civil society organizations. There was unanimity that the time has come for us to teach our people - ordinary people - English as a language in schools. In order to work out first steps, a Working Group was constituted. The report submitted by this group was used as an input in NKC deliberations. Based on these inputs, NKC submitted its recommendations to the Prime Minister in October 2006. The recommendations broadly deal with the modalities of introducing English in schools from Class I, teacher training, language pedagogy and resource support for language teaching and learning.

## Networks

### 1. Knowledge Network

Extensive educational infrastructure and resources are required to meet the challenge of producing quality trained personnel in sufficient numbers in the country. While the requirement of having enough quality educational institutions with adequate research facilities cannot be compromised, one way of meeting this challenge is to share the existing educational material, equipment and facilities available in the limited number of centres of excellence with a large number of universities and technical, agricultural and medical institutions throughout the country. In addition, research and development activity in various fields the world over is increasingly being carried out through inter-institutional and even trans-national collaborative approaches. This has become necessary owing to the increased activity and data-intensive research problems requiring intensive computation. Key elements in this approach are consultations, data sharing, and resource sharing. Thus it is necessary to create facilities to enable Indian researchers to undertake such collaborative efforts at reasonable cost. Sharing of Research & Development infrastructure and data, which has been an approach favoured in Europe from the 1980s and since then adopted by other countries around the world, could provide a viable solution for India as well.

An NKC project explored the possibility of establishing an efficient and cost-effective network design to interconnect all universities, research and development institutions, science and technology institutions; health service facilities, agricultural research and extension services and libraries in the country with high-speed access. A white paper outlining the concept and the approach has been prepared for NKC by Dr. D.P.S. Seth, an external expert. This report was extensively circulated amongst relevant stakeholders, and feedback and suggestions were incorporated to finalize NKC recommendations on this subject which have been submitted to the Prime Minister (December 2006).

## 2. Health Information Network

A reliable, swift, real-time health data collection system is essential to enhance the quality of health care delivery in India. Moreover, independent growth of health care delivery institutions could create multiple dissimilar standards of data collection and dissemination which would increase the cost of health care enormously. A Health Network is thus urgently needed to pre-empt these and other problems confronting mature health care systems of the world today.

Recognizing this, NKC has constituted a Working Group on the Health Information Network, composed of experts in the area. The group is in the process of holding extensive discussions and will address issues such as the required IT and clinical standards, and the regulatory framework that needs to be put in place to facilitate a national level, web-based, secure electronic health information system. The Working Group has held two meetings to discuss these issues.

## Portals

Web portals have risen in popularity as a way of aggregating, organizing and presenting content of a uniformly high standard in a customized and personalized way. A web portal is essentially a web site or service that offers a single point of access to information on a given subject and allows users to share and create a broad array of resources and services, such as case studies, e-

mail groups, forums and search engines within that sector. NKC recognizes that as the drive towards decentralization, right-to-information, people's participation and transparency sweeps the country, tools like public portals can play an important role in ensuring that more people exercise their rights.

In this context NKC has adopted the following procedure for setting up public portals on certain key sectors-

- Identification of champion or lead organization(s).
- Submission of proposal on architecture of the portal by the champion organization(s) for consideration by the Commission.
- Identification of stakeholders and partners and setting up of framework for portal management.
- Development of content.
- Launch of Portal

**India Water Portal** is being developed by Arghyam Trust, a public charitable trust. Initiated in January 2006, it was launched in January 2007.

The portal seeks to create an open platform for sharing information and knowledge about the water sector. The primary objectives of the portal are:

1. Increase awareness and demystify various aspects of water management for a general audience.
2. Share successful techniques and experience amongst serious practitioners
3. Provide a platform for information flows between multiple stakeholders.

**India Energy Portal** is being developed along similar lines, with Tata Energy Research Institute (TERI) as the lead organization. The portal was launched in January 2007. The broad functions of the energy portal would include the following.

1. Identification of sources and providing essential knowledge on basic aspects of energy
2. Providing data and information in a comprehensive manner.
3. Enabling efficient and effective retrieval of information.
4. Maintaining and updating the knowledge repository.

5. Providing a platform for interaction and exchange of ideas.

A proposal for developing an **India Environment Portal** has been received from the Centre for

Science and Environment (CSE) and is under consideration by NKC.

Possible future portals could be on **Citizen's Rights, Health, Employment** etc.

