

# AN ENQUIRY INTO THE REASONS FOR LACK OF PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING AMONG INDIVIDUAL ADULT LEARNERS: A CASE STUDY OF INDIA

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**ABSTRACT:** Poverty has become one of the major reasons for lack of motivation for participating in learning processes, especially among the adults. Poverty has victimized many individuals to leave their education and opt for employment to sustain themselves and their family. Lifelong learning as a process of learning can be of some relevance as a tool of motivation and participation in the learning among the individuals, where the individuals can be active in the labor market (enhancing motivation) and also participate in the learning process. The paper investigates the impact of poverty on lack of motivation to participate in education. The paper analyses the research problem by discussing the case of India, where two adult learners were interviewed. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model and Cross – Chain of Response Model provide as the theoretical perspective for the study to examine the issue of lack of motivation and participation among adult learners. The paper concludes by emphasizing on the fact that poverty does influence the adult learner's in India in terms of motivating them to participate in their education. This is able to be also argued that learning process involves need for motivation and participation unlike the traditional process of intellectual development. Emotion (motivation) and sociality (participation) are very important elements for enhancing cognitive abilities (formal qualification) of an individual.

**KEY WORDS:** motivation, participation, poverty, learning, barriers for learning, and case of India.

## INTRODUCTION

The background for investigating the subject is the present scenario of larger economic underdevelopment and its impact on adult learners in India. In order to meet the global economic competition, social expenditures by the government have drastically reduced. Economic development has been prioritized over other social policies in the country. Today, 36 per cent of India's population (rural and urban) is below poverty line (GoI, 2007).

Poverty has become one of the major reasons for lack of motivation for participating in learning processes especially among the adults (Ahl, 2006). Basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter and so on are deprived to the large

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section of the population hitherto. Poverty has victimized many individuals to leave their education and opt for employment to sustain themselves and their family. At present, only 8 per cent of the adult population is getting higher education in India, whereas in developed countries it is approximately 24 per cent (University of New Delhi, 2007).

It is an observed fact that lack of economic support to individuals' leads to increase in number of adults to discontinue learning. Poverty is so strongly embedded in the country that it cannot be eliminated almost immediately. Lifelong learning as a process of learning can be of some relevance as a tool of motivation and participation in the learning among the individuals, where the individuals can be active in the labor market (enhancing motivation) and also participate in the learning process. Individuals here refer to the adults. In order to analyze the possible solution to the problem of lack of motivation among adult learners in India, lifelong long learning is can be considered as an answer.

Lifelong learning is defined as "the process of learning which has both quantitative content (more learning for more adults) and also qualitative content i.e. adults must learn to change and develop rapidly in order to keep up the increasing demands/basic necessities within the society" (Knud, 2003). But the paper is concerned to analyze the lack of motivation among adults to participate in the learning process, which enhances their personality and provides them with certain status in the society. The aspect of lifelong learning is considered as an alternative process of learning, which is opens up a strong prospect of larger research on the existing problem of lack of motivation for participating among adults in India. LLL (Life Long Learning) as a field of study is developing in India; it has not yet taken a complete conceptual formation hitherto.

Through theory and related to two individual case stories of adult learners in India, the paper analyzes the reasons for lack of motivation among adult learners to participate in the learning processes within the research question: "*Why and how does poverty causes lack of motivation for participation towards learning among adults in India?*".

Poverty for this paper has been understood in relative terms as "poverty line for the urban areas is Rs. 296 or US\$ 7.4 per month and for rural areas Rs. 276 or US\$ 6.9 per month, i.e. people in India who earn less than Rs. 10 per day" (GoI, 2005).<sup>1</sup> Further the report elaborates that poverty line is drawn with an intake of 2,400 calories in rural areas and 2,100 calories in urban areas. If a person is unable to get that much minimum level of calories, then he/she is considered as being below poverty line.

Motivation for this study is defined as "a state of *readiness* of the individual which is *self-directed* and *self-oriented*, to participate in the process and accomplish the task" (Beck, 1990). Deficiency of this state among the individuals is understood as lack of motivation for participation among adults in India.

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<sup>1</sup>At this level of earning, even in a poor country like India, survival on Rs. 10 per day is a nightmare! This can actually be translated to Rupees. 3650 per year i.e. US\$ 75 per year.

Participation means “a learning activity, whether in organized classes or self-directed, is not a single act but the result of a chain of responses, each based on an evaluation of the position of the individual in his or her environment” (Courtney, 1992:125).

Different societies and cultures will have contrasting understanding of what it is to be an adult. The nominal definition of an adult has many variations like based on psychological, behavioral and other factors. However, World Health Organization defines adult “as an individual who is between the age group of 18 or over” (cited by Ahl, 2006). This definition of an adult is discussed in this paper.

### **THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

This essay argues that motivation for participating in learning among adult individuals in India should not be regarded as something residing within the individual only. But motivation should be seen as relational concept. Many barriers for motivation like situational or external barriers are something which is considered as important to address the research question.

The main line of argument here is that participation depends on the extent to which a person has been able to meet a range of primary and secondary needs (see figure 1 below, Maslow 1987) and the influence of positive and negative forces. For example, as basic primary needs are met (as one’s economic and social position “improves”), higher needs are activated, and the balance between negative and positive forces shifts. As a result people are more prepared to take part in educational activities.

**Figure 1:**  
Maslow’s Need Based Hierarchy Model



Source: A. Gambrel Patrick & Rebecca Cianci (2003:145).

According to R.C. Beck (1990), the higher social classes have a need for a form of learning which will satisfy the “higher needs”, as outlined by Maslow’s theory (1987). While among the lower classes, whose needs are tied to brute survival needs; their needs are tied to jobs and the market place to meet these basic needs. This is an apt reference, which indicates clearly the behavioral tendency of adults with regard to their social status. Economic well being, determines the social status of the individual. As mentioned above, the definition of poverty is based on the economic criteria, which categories people who earn less as below poverty line. Contextualizing this, the paper below provides how this situation influences the choices or behavior of the individual towards by prioritizing their needs.

An obvious means of attempting to explain the strength and direction of behavior (i.e. motivation) is to postulate that people experience certain physiological “needs” other theories attempt to develop understanding of the psychological process involved in motivation. Considering the problem addressed in this paper, the paper focuses on the physiological needs as against psychological needs. A.H. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1987) is one of the most referenced and discussed motivation theories. The above triangle in figure 1 (Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, 1987) has two related aspects. *First*, it assumes that the needs are activated in a sequential manner with a need at a higher level emerging only when the next lower-level need has been satisfied. *Second*, when a need is satisfied, it decreases in strength and ceases to dominate behavior; the next higher need in the hierarchy then increases in strength and assumes the control of behavior. It is understood that higher level needs develop when lower needs have been satisfied. However, the behaviorists’ stimuli response model critiques the motivation theory. According to them when individuals satisfy a particular need, it no longer acts as a motivator (Ahl, 2006). Further, a major problem arises in trying to infer from Maslow’s theory is the length of time elapsing between lower need satisfaction and higher need emergence (McGivney, 1993). This could be a long period, perhaps even several years, or it could be immediate, as when a person turns directly from satisfied lower need to an unsatisfied higher need.

When I read about Maslow’s theory (1987), I identify that it is concerned with the contents (i.e. specific needs) of human motivational systems. By this I can understand that individuals as mentioned by the hierarchy of needs model (Maslow, 1987) when they move ahead from satisfying the lower order needs would require a new motivation for reaching the other needs in the hierarchy. An alternative, and complementary, approach to understanding motivation lies in examining the psychological processes that are involved in motivation (Courtney, 1992). For instance, people will direct their efforts towards the goal which they value. However, the existence of valued goal is not sufficient condition for action; people will act only when they have a reasonable expectation that their actions will lead to a desired goal. The important role played by expectations in human behavior has long been recognized in academic psychology. The expectancy theory predicts that outcomes which have high expectations of being realized and which are highly valued will direct the person to invest a lot of effort in his/her tasks (Courtney,

1992). Thus, motivation should be understood in a relational terms considering both the physiological and psychological. It is both the external and the internal (*content and process respectively*) aspect of an individual which is an important aspect for stimulating motivation.

Following from the above discussion, I want to discuss a highly influential model – that of R.C. Beck (1990) takes various elements from the theories just described and moulds them into a seven-stage process. It begins with the individual and ends with external factors. It is called the “chain of response” model because each of the stages is seen as links in a chain. According to S. Courtney (1992:85), participation and motivation for learning over the years have become synonyms. For instance, motivation for participating in a learning process among the adults can itself be considered as a vital motivating factor among the individuals. Participation in a learning activity, whether in organized classes or self-directed, is not a single act but the result of a chain of responses, each based on an evaluation of the position of the individual in his or her environment (Courtney, 1992:125). The main elements in the chain of response model are: (1) Self-evaluation, (2) Attitudes about education, (3) The importance of goals and the expectations that these will be met, (4) Life transitions, (5) Opportunities and barriers, (6) Information on educational opportunities, and (7) The decision to participate.

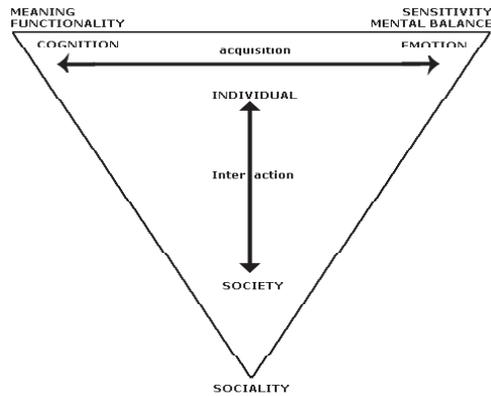
It is understood that each stage influences another. “The more positive the learner’s experience at each stage, the more likely he or she is to reach the last stage – the decision to participate” (McGivney, 1993:27). Thus, motivation to participate in learning among adult learners is determined on the fulfillment of these basic/primary necessities. Individuals who cannot afford to fulfill these necessities are discouraged from participating in learning process, as the priorities of the individual change towards survival.

To understand the process of learning, the theoretical underpinning of the concept of learning becomes important. It has been largely observed that learning as a concept or definition has/is undergone a paradigm shift in the contemporary era (Knud, 2003:103). Learning process determines the motivation and participation among adult learners. Learning is defined as:

[...] all processes leading to permanent capacity change – whether they be physical, cognitive, emotional or social in nature – that do not exclusively have to do with biological maturation or aging. This means that the learning concept also extends to such functions as personal development, socialization, qualification and competence development, as the difference between these terms is mainly the point of view towards learning which is adopted (Knud, 2003:104).

According to Illeris Knud (2003), there are three interrelated dimensions of learning – cognitive, emotional and social (see figure 2 below for illustration). Through the cognitive dimension, knowledge, skills, understanding, meaning and functionality are developed. Through the emotional dimension, patterns of emotion and motivation, attitudes, sensitivity and mental balance are developed. Through the social-societal dimension, potentials for empathy, communication, participation and sociality are developed.

**Figure 2:**  
The Process and Dimensions of Learning



Source: Illeris Knud (2003:109). Also adopted from [http://level3.dit.ie/html/issue1\\_murphy\\_figure2.html](http://level3.dit.ie/html/issue1_murphy_figure2.html) [accessed in New Delhi, India: November 26, 2008 at 14.30 hrs).

The above illustration (figure 2) provides us with an understanding that the traditional learning theories which emphasizes on cognitive dimension alone is of little help to understand the learning process comprehensively. It is the combination of cognition, emotion and social dimensions which conceptualize the process of learning as an adequate tool for understanding the learning process today (Knud, 2003). This conceptualization can be argued that learning process involves need for motivation and participation unlike the traditional process of intellectual development. Emotion (motivation) and sociality (participation) are very important elements for enhancing cognitive abilities (formal qualification) of an individual. However, according to Maslow's need based hierarchy model, unless the basic necessities of an individual are fulfilled, motivation for participating in learning activity is hindered. In addition to this, S. Courtney (1992) argues that the learning environment is a vital aspect of enhancing participation among learners. Thus, motivation and participation are two important elements for adult learners. The understanding of learning theory as defined by Illeris Knud (2003) supported with theories of motivation (Maslow's need based hierarchy, 1987) and participation among adult learners (Cross theory of chain of responses), provides a sound foundation to answer the research question: "*Why and how does poverty causes lack of motivation for participation towards learning among adults in India?*".

To substantiate the case of India (a developing country), the flowing discussion provides an understanding of the existing social hierarchies. In her discussion of education in the "developing world", S. Graham-Brown (1991:50) lists a series of filters, both within the educational system itself, and in the wider economy and society, which tend to reproduce existing social hierarchies. As she comments, these filters are of different types and intensities depending on the goals and character

of particular governments and societies. About the educational filters, some forms of selection are cited as follows:

- those overtly defined by government policy: for example, exclusions based on race or language.
- those created by gaps in the education system (especially in rural areas).
- *those caused by the inability of certain disadvantaged groups to enroll or to remain at school because of language, gender or the poverty or isolation of the community.* (emphasis added)
- the way the formal education system selects through examinations – although it may be formally accessible to all, relatively few are expected to complete all its stages.
- *the chances of an adult completing education depend on his or her socio-economic circumstances, including the economic situation of the family, the educational background of parents and the perceived relevance of education.* (emphasis added)
- different types of education in a particular society are given differing social and economic values: for example, private/public, academic/vocational, formal/non-formal.
- the value placed on different types of work and skills: for example, manual as opposed to white-collar work (Graham-Brown, 1991:52).

The above listing of selections draws our attention to social and structural factors which may affect motivation for participation in adult learning in India. To emphasize on the individual, I mean we have to ask the question what makes the individual to make choices – choice of participating in learning or his/her interest for non-participation. To address the research questions I would like to highlight that the vital barriers for non-participation can be qualified as “situational barriers”:<sup>2</sup> lack of money – the cost of studying, the cost of child care and so on, lack of time, for example, because of job and home responsibilities and lack of transport to study venue.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS**

Narrative case study method is employed to analyze the research problem. Narrative case studies are qualitative procedures in which researchers describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about these individuals, and write narratives about their experiences to situate research findings (Cresswell, 2008). However, it is not possible to generalize the research finding from these tow case studies considering the number and diversity of the population in India.

The following resources form as a foundation for theoretical and empirical data, as they provide a clear framework to analyze the research question: (1) Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory, 1987; (2) Cross theory of Chain of Response Model as cited by R.C. Beck, 1990; (3) Illeris Knud on comprehensive definition of Learning, 2003; and (4) Two narrative case stories of individuals from India, 2008.

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<sup>2</sup>A situational barrier is defined as barriers arising from one’s situation at a given time (McGivney, 1995).

Acknowledging the practical difficulties in collecting the case stories from India, the case studies were collected and interpreted through telephonic conversation with the respective individuals. This was the major challenge in methodology, I was unable to practically observe the subjects emotions and behavioral trends during conversation. Both the individuals referred in the case come from different region and context, but the common aspect among them is poverty. The collection of case story was based on the following inclusions: subjects/individuals understanding of learning, what are the hindrances/barriers for learning among the individual, what do they understand for lifelong learning, how does lifelong learning influence their process of learning. Following are the two case stories as empirical data for this paper:

### **A. CASE STORY ONE**

Ms. Meenakshi aged 24, residing in the district of Pollachi, Tamil Nadu (South India). She comes from a very poor family background. She has completed her Bachelor's degree in Chemistry from Bharathiyar University, with a top rank in the university. She has been one among the brilliant and hard working student in her school. However, from past 4 years she has discontinued her studies, and has been working in a pharmaceutical shop in her district.

Learning means attending school and writing exams regularly which contributes a certain qualification and helps to improve once personality. But today I am unable to learn by participating in school. My financial inadequacy is a major reason for my lack of motivation towards learning activity. It has made me to prioritize earning more than learning. My immediate motivation here is to look after my family and cater to family needs and necessities. If I am able to make some savings out my earning, I would be eager to fulfill my urge to continue my learning activities. Lifelong learning might be a new trend in education, I don't know much about this (interview with Meenakshi, 2008a).

### **B. CASE STORY TWO**

Mr. Linesh, aged 27, resides in the capital city of India, New Delhi. He has completed his Bachelor's degree in Social Sciences from Delhi University. His Father died when he was 24 years old. Since then he was discouraged from attending school as he could not afford his tuition and living expenditures. He had to take care of his family needs for survival. He has been working in a textile factory as a manual laborer from past 2 years. He has two sisters and a mother who are living on his income.

Learning is something which contributes for an individual's ability to develop skills and competencies. For me learning is very important for enhancing my status in the society. I could not continue my higher education as my main concern was to meet my family responsibilities. Lifelong learning as I understand it might be to do with learning throughout life time, but I consider fulfilling my basic needs first and then continue learning for my future. Stabilizing my family life at this moment is important then developing myself (interview with Linesh, 2008b).

Using adult and their lack of motivation in India as a base line and considering the case stories, as an empirical data this essay would examine the application and implication of the theoretical perspective mentioned above. I would like to contextualize my analyses with the case studies of two individuals from India who belong to Below Poverty Line (BPL) in order to understand the process of lack of motivation for them to participate in the learning process. These case stories along with the theoretical perspective are intended to be used as resource for addressing the research questions as to find out how and why does poverty become a major reason for lack of motivation among adult learners in India. However, by analyzing two case stories it would be a hard task to have a general answer to the problem addressed in this essay. But we can appreciate the primary problem and solution of the most prominent hindrance for motivation among adult learners in India.

Following the above mentioned case stories, overcoming poverty which forms as one of the basic needs for an individual becomes very significant for motivation. In both the cases learning was conceptualized differently. For Ms. Meenakshi, *“Learning means attending school and writing exams regularly which contributes a certain qualification and helps to improve once personality”* (interview with Meenakshi, 2008a). For her learning is understood as a formal process. According to case story two: *“Learning is something which contributes for an individual’s ability to enhance skills and competencies”* (interview with Linesh, 2008b). For him learning is more of informal process which can be acquired given motivation to do so for self development. However, what is common between the two cases is their understanding of the importance of learning in their lives and more importantly we can decipher from both the cases that learning does contribute to his/her personality development. But this process of learning didn’t happen as they could not afford it.

The cases provide us with an understanding that individuals set priority to physiological needs than other needs like education. They had no alternative other than earning; learning was something of additional need to them. As said by Meenakshi, *“My immediate motivation here is to look after my family and cater to family needs and necessities”* (interview with Meenakshi, 2008a). Her choices were influenced by the external factors like poverty than on her intrinsic needs i.e. motivation to learn more. According to Linesh (2008b), *“I could not continue my higher education as my main concern was to meet my family responsibilities”*; thus he could not continue his learning endeavor as his role of looking after his family was his main priority. Working for basic needs was his immediate goal or motivation. As A.H. Maslow’s theory (1987) posits that an individual will satisfy basic- level of needs (physiological needs see figure 1 above) before modifying behavior for higher-level of needs.

As understood by above participation in learning process is influenced by individuals’ internal and external factors (Beck, 1990). The decision to participate in learning activity is based on the individual’s situational contexts. These situational contexts are strong motivational drivers among the individuals. As discussed above, barriers caused by the inability of the disadvantaged individuals due to

poverty, form as a vital input to substantiate the case studies (Graham-Brown, 1991). Considering the above illustration of the case stories we can understand that poverty was a strong external force which caused lack of motivation for both of them to participate in learning process. Their participation in learning process could enhance his/her capacity such as physical, cognitive and emotional/social (see figure 2 from Illeris Knud, 2003).

Individuals personal development was hindered as their priorities were in self-sustaining his/her family. Thus, the understanding of learning discussed above, which enables individuals to a permanent capacity change was not realized in the above cases. If an individuals capacity is enhanced, a sense of self-satisfaction is realized which enables to achieve higher order needs (see figure 1). This perception is important because, if the individuals could not overcome their basic necessities (Physiological needs) as mentioned by the Maslow's theory the motivation for higher order needs is not considered to be important (Maslow, 1987).

As understood by the above discussion of the theory and case stories, satisfying basic needs does form as a central motivation tool among adults. Considering the description of the problem, theory and empirical data the analyses can be concluded by putting forth the finding that, poverty does cause lack of motivation for participating in learning process among adults in India.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the preceding case stories, it is evident that poverty causes for lack of motivation among adult learners in India. As described by A.H. Maslow (1987) and as discussed above satisfying basic needs becomes the foremost priority for the individuals. The higher order needs like participating in the learning process, becomes a secondary motivation for the individuals. As understood by Illeris Knud (2003), definition of learning process we can conclude that poverty hinders an individual's emotional and social status in order to enhance his/her intellectual ability. Motivation for participation in the learning process is stalled by external barriers like poverty in an individual's life stages (Beck, 1990).

However, it is not only the external barriers like poverty which can be concluded as a strong cause for lack of motivation. The reasons for lack of motivation are both internal and external, and also contextual and it differs from individual to individual. As I understand from this paper that poverty is so strongly rooted in India and its influence on individuals is so robust, I agree to the fact that poverty does cause lack of motivation for participating learning process among adults. But I don't agree to the fact that it is the only factor influencing motivation given the changing culture and structure of Indian society at present.

## **PERSPECTIVES**

The paper does conclude that poverty does in many ways causes lack of motivation for participation towards learning process among adults in India. However, in

this paper only the satisfaction of basic physiological needs is considered to be a motivating factor for participating in the learning process. It would be a good idea according to me to analyze the case of India by considering the psychological processes involved in hindering and enhancing motivation for participation in learning process among adults. Analyzing the research problem with two case stories among the huge population of adults in India would not be adequate to come to any generalized conclusions. Collecting multiple case stories would have provided more strong evidence of the problem and consolidate the research findings.

It is my interest to do a larger research on what are the possible solutions to overcome the problem of poverty for lack of motivation? How vocational training programs in India, enhance motivation among adults in the existing labor market?

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