

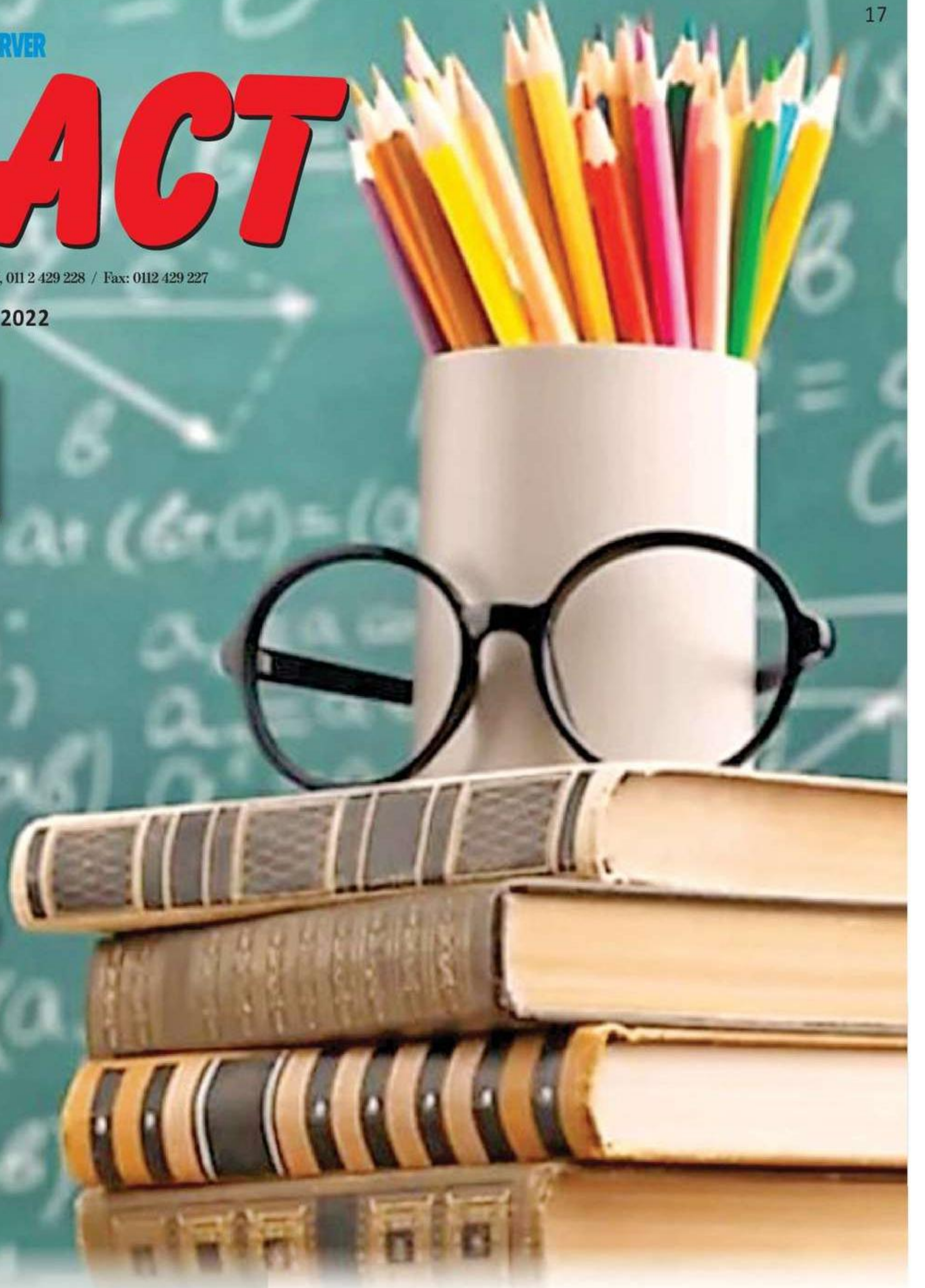
SUNDAY OBSERVER

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SEPTEMBER 4, 2022

# Literacy and Reading: Key to Life's Knowledge



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Reading is one of the first skills that we pick up in school or even earlier. I could actually read both Sinhala and English before attending school, thanks to comic books, (*Chitra Katha*) which have faded away in Sri Lanka.

In today's world, living without being able to read would be unimaginable, but around 800 million children and adults around the world cannot read or write their own language(s), according to UNESCO. With the exception of a few native or tribal languages that have no known script, all other languages have an alphabet which can be combined into words to form sentences. Thus the disability to read - illiteracy - is akin to a disability. There are three types of skills we pick up in our formative years - alphabetic literacy, numeracy (having Arabic numeral skills) and the ability to tell the time on an analogue clock.

## Broad interpretation

Literacy is traditionally defined in dictionaries as the ability to read and write. In the modern world, this is one way of interpreting literacy. One more broad interpretation sees literacy as knowledge and competence in a specific area. The concept of literacy has evolved in meaning. The meaning has been expanded to include the ability to use language, numbers, images, computers, and other basic means to understand, communicate, gain useful knowledge, solve mathematical problems and use the dominant symbol systems of a culture.

Experts at a recent UNESCO meeting have proposed defining literacy as the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts". The experts said: "Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society".

Literacy data published by UNESCO shows that since 1950, the adult literacy rate at world level has increased by 5 percentage points every decade on an average, from 55.7 percent in 1950 to 86.2 percent in 2015. However, for four decades, the population growth was so rapid that the number of illiterate adults kept increasing, rising from 700 million in 1950 to 878 million in 1990. Since then, the number has fallen to less than 800 million.

## New developments

The rapidly changing global context took a new meaning over the past years, hampering the progress of global literacy efforts. In the aftermath of the Covid pandemic now in its third year, nearly 24 million learners might never return to formal education, out of which, 11 million are projected to be girls and young women. To ensure no one is left behind, we need to enrich and transform the existing learning spaces through an integrated approach and enable literacy learning in the perspective of lifelong learning.

This year's International Literacy Day will be celebrated worldwide on September 8 under the theme, Transforming Literacy Learning Spaces and will be an opportunity to rethink the fundamental importance of literacy learning spaces to build resilience and ensure quality, equitable, and inclusive education for all. A literacy learning place can be a classroom, community centre, a place of worship, a private home or even a medium such as Television. Incidentally, September is celebrated as the Literacy Month in Sri Lanka, with the key event being the Colombo International Book Fair held at the BMICH.

At the global level, a two-day hybrid international event will be organised on 8 and 9 September 2022, in Côte d'Ivoire, Africa. The International Literacy Day global celebration lies at the heart of regional, country and local levels. Since 1967, International Literacy Day celebrations have taken place annually around the world to remind the public of the importance of literacy as a matter of dignity and human rights, and to advance the literacy agenda towards a more literate and sustainable society. Several events will be held in Sri Lanka too to mark the day.

## Universal access to quality education

Literacy is one of the key issues in education worldwide. The issue of literacy is a key component of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by world leaders in September 2015, promotes, as part of its agenda, universal access to quality education and learning opportunities throughout people's lives. SDG Goal 4 has as one of its targets ensuring that all young people achieve literacy and numeracy and that adults who lack these skills are given the opportunity to acquire them.

Literacy is the key to education, but more importantly, it is the key to life. Leave alone books and news-

papers, just imagine not being able to read a destination board on a bus, the price list in a store or an invitation card. It is the one skill that you need to get through, according to the famous book "All I Really Wanted to Learn I learned in the Kindergarten".

In fact, in the days when education was not so accessible and illiteracy was widespread, symbols and signs were used to enlighten the people. When pioneering traffic planners were trying to organise traffic, they initially thought of using signs that read 'Stop' 'Ready' and 'Go', but they quickly realised that many people would not be able to read them. Hence the use of Red, Amber and Green to represent the same words (though some countries give the wording also for the benefit of the colour blind).

## Tightly intertwined

The use of symbols for political parties, which continues to this day, came about because elections officials feared that people would not be able to read party or candidate names. Today, even though most people can read and write, these symbols persist mainly because of their universality and convenience.

Literacy is of course tightly intertwined with languages. Languages, with their complex implications for identity, communication, social integration, education and development, are of strategic importance for people and planet. Yet, due to globalisation processes, they are increasingly under threat, or disappearing altogether. When languages fade, so does the world's rich tapestry of cultural diversity. Opportunities, traditions, memory, unique modes of thinking and expression - valuable resources for ensuring a better future - are also lost. This is why literacy matters, because we need to keep the languages alive.

Language is fundamental to communication of all kinds, and it is communication that makes change and development possible in human society. There is also a growing awareness that languages and literacy play

a vital role in development, in ensuring cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, but also in strengthening co-operation and attaining quality education for all.

## Mastery of the first language

To foster sustainable development, learners must have access to education in their mother tongue and in other languages. It is through the mastery of the first language or mother tongue that the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy are acquired. Local languages, especially, minority and indigenous, transmit cultures, values and traditional knowledge, thus playing an important role in promoting a sustainable future. It is our duty to foster languages and ensure that everyone can access them to the fullest possible measure.

But the habit and hobby of reading is under threat around the world, thanks to the rise of the Internet and the mobile smartphone. Everyone, from toddler to octogenarian is addicted to the smartphone or tablet, giving up physical books and other reading material. Their logic is, why read news in a newspaper when the smartphone shows things happening here and now? Why read a book when you can watch the TV series based on the book? In fact, the addiction to 'screen time' has become a social problem as well, as people are living increasingly virtual lives sans any real-life interactions.

On the other hand, I am not too worried about people reading books and articles on their tablets, smartphones and e-readers (such as the Kindle), as long as they read. A book is a book, whether you read it in physical or virtual form. Books can even be read to you by another person, usually a professional actor or narrator - this is called an Audiobook. Curiously, the Internet does have many sites on books which give recommendations on what to read, which leads to some harmony between the web and books. There is even an app called '12min' which condenses leading non-fiction books to a 12-minute read for those leading busy lives. If you do not have time to read, it will read the book for you.

## e-books

The idea of e-books and e-book readers is not new. As far back as 1930 when electronic screen technologies did not even exist, American writer Bob Brown predicted that the printed book was bound for obsolescence. Ironically, he predicted this in a printed book, the only medium available then. In his book *The Readies*, he said the time has come "to rid the reader of the cumbersome book".

He envisioned a "machine that will allow us to keep up with the vast volume of print available today and be optically pleasing," which is exactly what an e-reader is. It can hold as many as 3,000 books and some Kindles can even store audio books which no one saw coming back in 1930.

e-books rose to prominence so fast, that many people even began to

THE HABIT AND HOBBY OF READING IS UNDER THREAT AROUND THE WORLD, THANKS TO THE RISE OF THE INTERNET AND THE MOBILE SMARTPHONE. EVERYONE, FROM TODDLER TO OCTOGENARIAN IS ADDICTED TO THE SMARTPHONE OR TABLET, GIVING UP PHYSICAL BOOKS AND OTHER READING MATERIAL. THEIR LOGIC IS, WHY READ NEWS IN A NEWSPAPER WHEN THE SMARTPHONE SHOWS THINGS HAPPENING HERE AND NOW? WHY READ A BOOK WHEN YOU CAN WATCH THE TV SERIES BASED ON THE BOOK? IN FACT, THE ADDICTION TO 'SCREEN TIME' HAS BECOME A SOCIAL PROBLEM AS WELL, AS PEOPLE ARE LIVING INCREASINGLY VIRTUAL LIVES SANS ANY REAL-LIFE INTERACTIONS

predict the death of printed books, also called 'dead-tree books'. (For most books printed now, that is not exactly true given the extensive use of recycled material in printing).

Not so fast, say those in the know. Amazon, the world's biggest physical bookseller as well as the biggest e-book seller, has reported strong growth in both sectors. The major book and literature fairs held in key cities still attract thousands. Moreover, the latest studies indicate that printed books are regaining popularity even among the younger generation. Reports on the death of the printed book have certainly been highly exaggerated. People do love the 'feel' of the printed book, even the smell of paper and the sheer pleasure of turning page after page, none of which can be replicated on an e-reader or a tablet. But today's best e-readers use a paper-like screen technology called E-Ink which is not reflective (unlike LCD screens) and is easier on the eye.

A study featured in the *Guardian* newspaper of UK gave half its participants a story on paper, and the other half the same story on screen. The result? The iPad readers did not feel that the story was as immersive, and therefore, were not able to connect with it on an emotional level. Those who read on paper were much more capable of placing the story's events in chronological order.

It is actually difficult to feel emotional about an electronic device - as the famous example goes, can you curl up in bed with a computer? You can, with a good book. And talking of going to bed, a Harvard study on e-reading and sleep deprivation found that if the e-book was "light emitting" (LCD) it took participants an average of 10 minutes longer to fall asleep

than those who read physical books instead.

## Not real books

The most popular sentiment that goes against e-books is that they are not 'real' books. It is well known that Amazon and other e-book providers can remotely wipe e-books in your collection if an issue with the publisher or a ban crops up. (This has actually happened). You actually do not own a physical copy of the book, in the same sense that you do not 'own' that download of the hottest Hollywood movie you just obtained (legally or illegally) from the Net. On the other hand, a physical Blu-Ray or DVD copy of a movie is yours to keep.

One might think that e-books are way cheaper than printed books, because there are virtually no distribution and transport costs involved. Wrong again. There is an alarming trend where the e-book is actually more expensive or priced very close to the physical book due to various contractual issues faced by publishers. Of course, there is no shipping costs associated with e-books.

At the end of the day, there really is nothing like going to a library or bookstore where you can feel and browse the books at your leisure. Many libraries even offer the e-book versions to complement their physical selection. Some publishers also offer the e-book version as a digital download if you buy the physical book - the same way you usually get a digital copy of a movie with a Blu-ray and an MP3 version with a CD/Vinyl album. Physical and digital worlds exist in harmony in the movie and music spheres and the same should happen in the world of books and literature.