

WEIGHT OF LITERACY! LITERALLY – TRANSLATING TO WEIGHT OF SCHOOL BAGS! ¹

INTRODUCTION

We look forward to celebrating the International Literacy Day tomorrow. We take our abilities to read and write for granted and to imagine a day without having this basic ability would be shocking for most of us. In spite of efforts of the governments and public bodies, the literacy rate is far from cent percent² and there is a scope for improvement in this area.

While we grapple with literacy, there is another issue of appropriateness of learning environments which we are dealing with. UNESCO has designed an apt theme of **TRANSFORMING LITERACY LEARNING SPACES³** that presents an opportunity to rethink the fundamental importance of literacy learning spaces to build resilience and ensure quality, equitable, and inclusive education for all.

A burdensome learning environment that is full of expectations can never be conducive to children. This has been stated time and again by various experts through their committee reports and views. The central government had set up a committee under Prof. Yashpal Sharma in 1992 and the Committee came out with its report '*Learning without Burden*', in 1993. While highlighting various other issues that had led to academic burdens and a joyless learning for children, the Committee also highlighted the problem of heavy school bags⁴.

BILLS, JUDGEMENTS AND POLICIES

Amongst all the aspects that are covered by law and conventions in today's world including right to sleep, right to silence, right to play etc. we also have an interesting

¹ The article reflects the general work of the author and the views expressed are personal. No reader should act on any statement contained herein without seeking detailed professional advice.

² As per the current statistics, the literacy rate in India is 74.04 per cent- 82.14 for males and 65.46 for females . [Profile - Literacy - Know India: National Portal of India](#)

³ [International Literacy Day 2022- Global event organized by UNESCO](#)

⁴ Report of the National Advisory Committee Appointed by the Ministry of Human Resource Development- 15 July 1993

judgement, a Bill and a National Policy on Weight of School Bags which have been examined below in detail.

8th December 2006: The Children's School Bag (Limitation on Weight) Bill, was introduced two decades ago in Rajya Sabha in 2006⁵, but was shelved later. The Bill had specified that:

Section 3: it shall be the duty of appropriate government to ensure that the weight of school bag to be carried by a child of particular class shall not be more than 10% of the weight of the child.

Section 4 & 5(1): Schools need to issue guidelines regarding the size and fabric of school bags and every school should provide lockers to each student in the school up to class eighth in order to enable them to keep their sports equipment, books and note books in the school.

Section 5(2) : Schools had to ensure that students carry appropriate bags, and use double straps to carry them. Teachers were to inform students in advance of the weight they should carry, teach them to pack their bags, and to keep them close to their bodies to distribute the weight.

Under Section 6, schools violating the rules made there under shall be liable for fine up to three lakh rupees.

In spite of the Committee Report and the Bill, the state of the weight of school bags for the children did not improve much.

The Maharashtra Government issued a **GR on 21st July 2015**,⁶ prescribing limits for weight of school bags carried by students and directed the officers to strictly implement the guidelines to state that the bags should not exceed 10% of the child's weight.

⁵ [Rajya Sabha](#) -Introduced on 8th December 2006

⁶ [201507171135220721.pdf \(maharashtra.gov.in\)](#)

A study conducted by the Associated Chamber of Commerce and Industry of India [ASSOCHAM]⁷ in **2016**, found that almost 65% of Indian school children aged between 7 to 13 years develop chronic backaches, spondylitis, postural scoliosis on early degeneration of the spine owing to the heavy backpack as majority of these children carry over 45% of the body weight in the form of bags, kits, sports equipment, instruments or study apparatus every alternate day. Heavy and uneven loads on the young children could easily lead to irreversible back problems and spinal deformation. This view has also been confirmed by various medical experts.

The State of Telangana Government issued a **G.O.Ms.No.22, dated 18.07.2017**⁸ listing out guidelines to limit the weight of school bags of students and further prohibited giving any home works for the students of classes I to V.

Thereafter on **29th May 2018**, in its landmark judgement, **M Purushothanan vs Union of India**⁹, the Madras High Court dealt with various issues that were leading to a burdensome learning environment for children. The Court initiated its landmark judgement with the significant words:

“The children are neither weightlifters nor school bags are loaded containers”.

Upon hearing the arguments of the parties in detail and considering the expert opinion of many doctors through research papers, the Court observed that the international standards do not let the children carry school bags that weigh more than 10% of their body weight. However, the school children are made to carry heavy loads of books and notebooks. Thus, the Court directed the Union of India to formulate a policy on children’s school bag on the lines of Children’s School Bag (Limitation on Weight) Bill, 2006 for reducing the weight of the school bags, according to the class.

This directive ultimately led to the issuance of the **School Bags Policy 2020** by the Ministry of HRD, Department of School Education & Literacy on 24th November 2020¹⁰.

⁷ Quoted from Madras HC judgement: W.M.P.No.9267 of 2018 and W.P.No.25680 of 2017

⁸ Commissioner & Director of School Education, Telangana, Hyderabad, Lr. Rc.No. 843/DSE/Planning-I/2017

⁹ Writ Petition No. 25680 of 2017

¹⁰ Department of School Education and Literacy Ministry of Education, Government of India 2020 Policy on School Bags

The 83 pager policy recommends bagless days, vocational trainings and a clear limitation on the weight of the school bags as per the universally accepted ratio of weight for school bag as 10 per cent of the body weight of the student across Classes I to X.

Suggestive table for class-wise range of average body weight of children

Sr. No.	Class	Average Body Weight Range (In Kg)	Bag Weight Range (Recommended) (In Kg)
1.	Pre Primary	10-16	No Bag
2.	Class I	16-22	1.6-2.2
3.	Class II	16-22	1.6-2.2
4.	Class III	17-25	1.7-2.5
5.	Class IV	17-25	1.7-2.5
6.	Class V	17-25	1.7-2.5
7.	Class VI	20-30	2-3
8.	Class VII	20-30	2-3
9.	Class VIII	25-40	2.5-4
10.	Class IX	25-45	2.5-4.5
11.	Class X	25-45	2.5-4.5
12.	Class XI	35-50	3.5-5
13.	Class XII	35-50	3.5-5

To gather the awareness of this issue, I had conducted an informal online survey to collect data on the awareness of this issue and the results demonstrate that most parents are not aware about the school bags policy. More than 50% of the people were not aware that the weight of the school bag should not exceed 10% of the weight of the child. 90% of the surveyors stated that the weight of the school bags was heavy.

CONCLUSION

Today, may be a good time for us to rethink our approach to this issue and enter into meaningful deliberations. Many important suggestions have been made time and again to implement the policy like:

- a) usage of lockers/ cubicles/ desk drawers to keep extra books and art kits at school;
- b) proper designing of time tables so that the subjects are divided equally;
- c) availability of clean drinking water at school so that children do not carry big bottles;
- d) usage of loose sheets and files for writing notes instead of separate notebooks; or
- e) use of light fabrics for designing the schools bags.

While the policy and directives are in place, the issue of practical implementation haunts us in spite of long passage of time. A collective and multi-dimensional approach of parents and schools with a new perspective that does not believe in burdening the children is the way forward. While we all want healthy and happy children, we should also be willing to take some concrete and firm steps towards reducing the burden on their tender shoulders.

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About Aarti

Aarti is experienced in corporate legal matters having specialization in drafting, vetting and negotiation of agreements. By qualification she is an advocate and a solicitor.