



Assessing Universal Basic Literacy in India

For Prelims: [National Education Policy \(NEP\) 2020](#), [New India Literacy Programme](#), [Annual Status of Education Report \(ASER\)](#), [National Sample Survey](#)

For Mains: Methods of Evaluating Universal Literacy, Government Strategies for Universal Literacy, Socio-Economic Implications of Literacy Levels.

Source: EPW

Why in News?

Recently, the **79th** round of the [National Sample Survey \(NSS\)](#), conducted between July 2022 and June 2023, revealed that **95.9% of individuals** in India possess basic literacy and numeracy skills.

- The survey assesses the literacy and basic numeracy skills of Indians aged 15-29, focusing on reading, writing, and arithmetic abilities.

What are the Key Findings of the Survey?

- In **rural areas**, **95.3%** of individuals have basic literacy and numeracy skills, compared to **97.4% in urban areas**.
 - Specifically, **97.4% of rural males and 93.4% of rural females** possess these skills, while in **urban areas**, **98% of males and 96.7% of females** meet this standard.
- States like **Mizoram (100%)**, **Goa (99.9%)**, and **Sikkim (99.9%)** lead in literacy rates, while **Bihar (91.9%)** and **Uttar Pradesh (92.3%)** lag behind.

Note: The NSS defines literacy as the **ability to read, write, and understand a simple message in any language**.

- The term **“universal”** generally implies full or near-complete coverage, typically close to 100%.
- As per [UNESCO](#), literacy extends beyond reading, writing, and counting; it's a continuous skillset involving identification, understanding, and communication, expanding to digital, media, and job-specific skills in our fast-changing, information-rich world.

What are the Government Strategies to Enhance Literacy and Numeracy Rates?

- [ULLAS \(Understanding of Lifelong Learning for All in Society\)](#)
- [National Education Policy \(NEP\) 2020](#)
- [New India Literacy Programme](#)
- [National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning](#)
- [Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan](#)
- [PRAGYATA](#)

- **National Literacy Mission (NLM):** The NLMA manages the [Saakshar Bharat Programme \(SBP\)](#), which enhances adult literacy across India by focusing on functional literacy for daily life skills.

How Universal is Universal Basic Literacy?

- **Inconsistent Definitions:** The term "basic literacy" lacks a universally accepted definition. For instance, the **National Literacy Mission** defines **literacy as the ability to read and write in any language**, which appears to be a very narrow interpretation of literacy.
- **Data Inconsistency:** According to the **NSS, 95.9% of youth possess basic literacy** and numeracy skills, **indicating near-universal proficiency**.
 - However, the [Annual Status of Education Report \(ASER\) 2023](#) highlights a contrasting scenario, **with 29% of students aged 14-18 in Class 10 or below unable to read at a second-grade level**.
- **Sampling Bias:** Many literacy assessments suffer from sampling bias, where certain demographics (**e.g.**, rural populations, marginalized communities) are underrepresented.
 - For individuals never enrolled in formal education, NSS's questions determine their ability to read and write based on self-reporting without formal tests.
 - For those enrolled in formal education, literacy was assumed if they had completed at least pre-primary or Class 1, without verifying their ability to read and write.
 - This method may not accurately reflect basic literacy skills.
- **Disability Exclusion:** Existing frameworks often overlook the needs of individuals with disabilities.
 - Non-accounting of literacy programs for this demographic leads to gaps in understanding their unique challenges and barriers to achieving basic literacy.

What are the Socio-Economic Implications of Literacy Levels in India?

- **Economic Growth:** High literacy rates contribute to economic development by enhancing workforce productivity and innovation.
 - A literate population is better equipped to engage in skilled labour, which is essential for India's transition to a [knowledge-based economy](#).
- **Social Empowerment:** Literacy empowers individuals, **particularly women**, by providing access to information and resources necessary for making informed decisions.
 - It plays a critical role in **reducing poverty levels** and **improving health outcomes** within communities.
 - The [World Bank](#) says **universal primary education** could reduce extreme poverty by 12%.
- **Regional Disparities:** Significant regional variations exist, with states like **Bihar and Uttar Pradesh** showing lower literacy rates that can hinder overall national progress.
- **Long-term Development Goals:** The findings align with the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs-4\)](#).
 - Ensuring universal access to quality education is vital for sustainable development and social equity.
- **Health and Well-being:** Literacy enhances health outcomes as literate individuals better understand health information, access services, and make informed choices.
 - **Educated women are 50% more likely to immunize their children**, improving future generations' health.
- **Social Cohesion and Stability:** Literacy enhances social cohesion by encouraging critical thinking and reducing social tensions.
 - **Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST)** found communities with **higher literacy rates** have lower violence and social unrest levels.

What Strategies Can Enhance Literacy and Numeracy Rates in India?

- **Standardised Definitions and Metrics:** Establishing a universal definition of basic literacy and **standardised metrics for assessment** can help create a more coherent framework for

measuring progress across different regions.

- **Inclusive Assessment Practices:** Developing assessment tools that account for diverse learning environments and populations, **including those with disabilities, can provide a more accurate picture of literacy levels.**
- **Strengthening Teacher Training:** Investing in teacher training equips educators with essential skills, especially in resource-limited rural areas. Continuous professional development keeps teachers updated on best practices like **Finland and Singapore.**
- **Community Engagement Programs:** Initiatives that involve local communities in promoting education can foster a culture of learning and increase enrollment rates.
 - The **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)** aims to promote inclusive education, but expanding these centers can further support marginalized groups.
- **Leveraging Technology:** Utilising digital platforms like [SWAYAM Prabha portal](#) for educational content delivery can enhance access to learning resources, especially in remote areas.
 - Mobile learning applications like **E-PG Pathshala** can be developed to provide interactive learning experiences for youth.
 - The [Digital India initiative](#) aims to bridge the digital divide, ensuring that students have access to online resources.
- **Quality of Education:** The [Kothari Commission](#) advocated for a curriculum that is relevant to the needs of society and the economy.
 - **Updating curricula** to include **practical skills and contemporary knowledge** can help students become more employable and engaged in their communities.

Drishti Mains Question

Q. Discuss the concept of universal literacy. Assess how youth literacy and numeracy in India affect socio-economic development and identify strategies to overcome challenges.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Which of the following provisions of the Constitution does India have a bearing on Education? (2012)

1. Directive Principles of State Policy
2. Rural and Urban Local Bodies
3. Fifth Schedule
4. Sixth Schedule
5. Seventh Schedule

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

- (a)** 1 and 2 only
- (b)** 3, 4 and 5 only
- (c)** 1, 2 and 5 only
- (d)** 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

Ans- (d)

Mains

Q1. How have digital initiatives in India contributed to the functioning of the education system in the country? Elaborate on your answer. **(2020)**

Q2. Discuss the main objectives of Population Education and point out the measures to achieve them in India in detail. **(2021)**

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