



## THE LITERACY SITUATION IN INDIA

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### **Abstract**

The literacy situation of a country is an important socio-economic indicator of development of that country. Literacy level and educational attainment are backbone of development in a developing country like India. The 2011 census counted 24 crore illiterate people over the age of 15. By March 2018, some 7.8 crore people have received literacy training under Saakshar Bharat Mission (SBM) launched by the government of India in 2009. This scheme engaged nearly 1.65 lakh preraks or vilage level workers to encourage illiterate people from their neighbourhoods to visit informal centres to be taught basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills by volunteer teachers. This paper shows the trend of literacy rate in India during 1951 to 2011. It also highlights the inter-state variation in the literacy rate and at the same time the gender disparity and rural-urban gap in the literacy rate of India. It also throws light on some important government and non-government measures taken to improve the literacy situation in India .

**Key Words:** Literacy, Census, Male, Female, Rural. Urban, State.

### **1. Introduction**

The basic definition of literacy is having the ability to read and write. For the purpose of census, a person in the age limit of seven and above, who can both read and write with understanding in any of the language is considered as a literate in India. Literacy plays a major role in the economic development of a nation. It enhances quality of life, awareness level and level of skill of people in the society.

### **2. Data and methodology**

Census is the main source of literacy data in India. However, the method of estimating the literacy has undergone changes over time in India. Up to 1891 census, the population was classified into three groups: literate, illiterate and under instruction. The ‘under instruction’ included persons attending schools, colleges or private institutions. The three-fold classification of population had some inherent problems of interpretation. Therefore, in 1901, the census of India switched over to two-fold classification of population into literate and illiterate, thus dropping the category of ‘under instruction’. However, the procedure of working out literacy rate in the country changed later at the time of 1991 census. In the censuses prior to 1991, it was a practice to calculate the literacy rate by taking into account the whole population. Since literacy rate will be more accurate if the population between the age group 0-6 is excluded, from 1991 the literacy rate was calculated for population of seven years of age and above.

### **3. Change in the literacy rate during 1951 to 2011**

Despite India has been a land of ancient tradition of literacy and education, the country’s population has been marked with an abysmally low level of literacy ever at the time census operations began in the country. There exists a wide regional disparity in literacy levels in the country. Similarly, there is a marked difference in literacy levels between males and females, between rural and urban areas and

**Table: 1 Trend in literacy rate and gender-gap in literacy during 1951 and 2011**

Census Year	Literacy Rate (%)	Male Literacy Rate (%)	Female Literacy Rate (%)	Gender-Gap in Literacy (%)
1951	18.33	21.16	8.86	12.30
1961	28.3	40.40	15.35	25.25
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97	23.98



<b>1981</b>	43.57	56.38	29.76	26.62
<b>1991</b>	52.21	64.13	39.29	24.84
<b>2001</b>	64.83	75.26	53.67	21.59
<b>2011</b>	74.04	82.14	65.46	16/68

Source: Census of India, 2011

between different social and economic segments of the population. **Table:1** shows that India had only 18.33% literate population at the commencement of the Indian Constitution and it became 74.04% in the census of 2011. The increase in the literacy rate was highest during 1991-2001(12.62%).

### 3.1 Gender-gap in literacy rate in India

There is a slower rate of growth of female literacy rate as compared to the male literacy rate. In 2001 census, for the first time the female literacy rate crossed the 50% mark. Another positive aspect is that the gender gap in literacy rate has declined continuously from 1971 census and it has declined by considerable amount during 2001 and 2011 (4.91%). According to 2011 census , less than one-fifth of male population were illiterate as compared to nearly one-third of female population (**Table: 1**). Gender based inequality, social discrimination and economic exploitation, the occupation of the girl child in domestic chores, the low enrolment of girls in schools, their low retention rate and high drop-out rate are some of the important factors responsible for poor female literacy rate in India.

### 3.2 Rural-urban gap in literacy rate in India

From **Table: 2**, it is clear that during 1951-2011, the urban literacy rate increased by 49.25% whereas the rural literacy rate increased by 54.67%. Still there is huge rural-urban gap in literacy in India. It was increasing up to 1971 census and then it became constant during 1981 and 1991. The rural-urban .

**Table: 2 Trend in rural-urban gap in literacy during 1951 and 2011**

Census Year	Rural Literacy Rate (%)	Urban Literacy Rate (%)	Rural-Urban Gap in Literacy (%)
<b>1951</b>	12.1	34.59	22.49
<b>1961</b>	22.5	54.4	31.9
<b>1971</b>	27.9	60.2	32.3
<b>1981</b>	36	67.2	31.2
<b>1991</b>	36	67.2	31.2
<b>2001</b>	59.4	80.3	20.9
<b>2011</b>	66.77	84.11	17.34

Source: Census of India, 2011

gap in literacy declined considerably during 1991 and 2001 (10.3%). One of the reasons behind this rural-urban gap is the lack awareness among the rural people and most importantly in many cases, girl children are not sent to school as they are forced to do domestic work or agricultural activity or get married.

### 4. State wise variation in the literacy rate: Top five and bottom five states / UTs by literacy rate in 2011

The literacy rates in India are not the same across different states. Some states are performing well whereas some are lagging behind. **Table: 3** shows the difference in the literacy rates between five best performing and five worst performing states / UTs in India. There is a



**Table: 3 Top five and bottom five states / UTs by literacy rate in 2011 census**

<b>Top five states / UTs</b>			
<b>States / UTs</b>	<b>Literacy Rate (%)</b>		
	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Kerala</b>	96.1	92	93.9
<b>Lakshadweep</b>	96	89.4	92.3
<b>Mizoram</b>	93.7	88.2	91.6
<b>Tripura</b>	92.8	83.1	87.8
<b>Goa</b>	92.2	81.8	87.4
<b>Bottom five states / UTs</b>			
<b>States / UTs</b>	<b>Literacy Rate (%)</b>		
	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Bihar</b>	73.4	52.7	63.8
<b>Arunachal Pradesh</b>	73.7	53.3	67
<b>Rajasthan</b>	75.6	56.2	67.1
<b>Jharkhand</b>	77.2	58	67.6
<b>Andhra Pradesh</b>	78.3	59.3	67.7

Source: Census of India,

huge gap in the literacy rate between the best performing state Kerala (93/9%) and the worst performing state Bihar (73/4%). In Kerala, the gender-gap in the literacy rate is also the lowest (only 4.1%). It is to be noted that the gender-gap in literacy is very high in the bottom five states whereas it is much lower in the top five states.

### 5. Some important facts regarding literacy situation in India

- India has the largest illiterate population in the world, 287 million, amounting to 37% of the world's total illiterate persons
- India's literacy rate has increased six times since the end of the British rule, yet India has the world's largest illiterate population.
- The literacy rate of female Dalits in Bihar is 38.5% in 2011. It is far behind India's progress trend.
- 60 lakh children in India are still out of school
- 92% government schools are yet to fully implement RTE (Right to Education) Act.
- India is ranked 123<sup>rd</sup> out of 135 countries in female literacy rate.

### 6. Some important facts regarding literacy situation in India

The right to education is a fundamental right. Different efforts have been taken by the government and non-government organisations to increase the literacy rate in India. International Literacy Day is celebrated each year on 8 September with the aim to highlight the importance of literacy to individuals, communities and societies.

#### 6.1 Government efforts

##### 6.1.1 National Literacy Mission

The *National Literacy Mission*, launched in 1988, aimed at attaining a literacy rate of 75 per cent by 2007. Its charter is to impart functional literacy to non-literates in the age group of 35–75 years. The Total Literacy Campaign is their principal strategy for the eradication of illiteracy. The Continuing Education Scheme provides a learning continuum to the efforts of the Total Literacy and Post Literacy programmes.



### 6.1.2 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan

The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* was launched in 2001 to ensure that all children in the 6–14-year age-group attend school and complete eight years of schooling by 2010. An important component of the scheme is the *Education Guarantee Scheme and Alternative and Innovative Education*, meant primarily for children in areas with no formal school within a one-kilometer radius. The centrally sponsored *District Primary Education Programme*, launched in 1994, had opened more than 160,000 new schools by 2005, including almost 84,000 alternative schools.

### 6.2 Non-governmental efforts

The bulk of Indian illiterates live in rural areas in India, where social and economic barriers play an important role in keeping the lowest strata of society illiterate. Government programmes alone, however well-intentioned, may not be able to dismantle barriers built over centuries. Major social reformation efforts are sometimes required to bring about a change in the rural scenario. Specific mention is to be made regarding the role of the People's Science Movements (PSMs) in the Literacy Mission in India during the early 1990s. Several non-governmental organisations such as Pratham, ITC, Rotary Club, Lions Club have worked to improve the literacy rate in India.

#### 6.2.1 Manthan Sampoorna Vikas Kendra

Manthan SVK is a holistic education program initiated by Divya Jyoti Jagriti Sansthan under the guidance of Shri Ashutosh Maharajji. This initiative, started in 2008, has since then reached and spread education to over 5000 underprivileged children across India, with its centers spread in Delhi - NCR, Punjab and Bihar. The main aim of Manthan is to provide not just academic but also mental, physical and emotional education. Manthan has also been working for adult literacy through its Adult Literacy Centres for illiterate women. Vocational education is also given attention to, with Sewing and Stitching Centres for women.

The motto of Manthan being *Saakshar Bharat, Sashakt Bharat*. It has been providing quality education selflessly.

#### 6.2.2 Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation

Shantha Sinha won a Magsaysay Award in 2003 in recognition of "Her guiding the people of Andhra Pradesh to end the scourge of child labor and send all of their children to school." As head of an extension program at the University of Hyderabad in 1987, she organized a three-month-long camp to prepare children rescued from bonded labor to attend school. Later, in 1991, she guided her family's *Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation* to take up this idea as part of its overriding mission in Andhra Pradesh. Her original transition camps grew into full-fledged residential "bridge schools." The foundation's aim is to create a social climate hostile to child labor, child marriage and other practices that deny children the right to a normal childhood. Today the MV Foundation's bridge schools and programs extend to 4,300 villages.

### 7. Conclusion

Although India has raised its current literacy rate of 75% (2016) from 12% at the time of independence, it still lags behind the world's average literacy rate of 84%. The government of India has taken several measures to improve the literacy rate in villages and towns of India. State-governments have been directed to ensure and improve literacy rate in districts and villages where people are very poor. As India ushers into a Digital Age and brings into focus educational reforms, the figure is a number that can make the policy makers cringe or take stock of the situation that calls out drastic measures. On the brighter side, there has been a good improvement in the literacy rate of India in the last 10 years but India's literacy cum continuous education programme has been put on pause for over two years. The Saakshar Bharat Mission (SBM) launched by the government of India in 2009 had a basic literacy and learning programmes. With the discontinued in 2017, a suitable segment of the neo literates would have replaced into illiterates.



### 7.1 Steps to be taken to improve literacy situation

- After gaining basic literacy, the neo-literates need to be engaged in further reading and writing under a continuous learning programmes buy the government.
- The policy makers will have to further strengthen literacy drives in areas where improvement has not been satisfactory, and among those segments of the population, which are yet to benefit from the fruits of development.

Going by previous growth rate, India will be able to achieve its universal literacy target not before 2060.

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