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India's Literacy Rate Reaches 81.1% but Rural, Gender and Learning Gaps Remain Major Challenges for Viksit Bharat

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Recent Developments:

- According to the **Periodic Labour Force Survey 2025**, India's overall literacy rate among persons aged **7 years and above** reached **81.1%**.
- **Urban literacy** stood at **89%**, compared with **77.4% in rural areas**, creating an **11.6 percentage-point rural-urban gap**.
- Rural male literacy stood at **84.8%**, while rural female literacy remained significantly lower at **70.3%**, highlighting the persistence of gender and geographical disparities.
- According to **UDISE+ 2025-26**, more than **24.72 crore students** were enrolled in schools, but retention declined sharply at the secondary stage, where the dropout rate reached **7%** and retention stood at **51.9%**.
- Under **ULLAS**, the government is expanding adult literacy through community participation, while **10 States/UTs** declared themselves fully literate between 2024 and 2026.

Understanding Literacy:

Definition and Changing Scope:

- The **Department of School Education and Literacy** treats literacy as more than the ability to read and write, with increasing emphasis on **foundational literacy, numeracy, digital literacy, financial literacy and critical life skills**.
- Under the national framework for full literacy, a State/UT achieving **95% literacy** is considered fully literate.
- The **Census 2011** definition considered a person aged **7 years and above** literate if they could read and write with understanding in any language.
- The broader contemporary understanding of literacy therefore links literacy with **participation in education, employment, social institutions and everyday life**.

India's Literacy Progress:

Long-Term Improvement:

- India's literacy rate increased from **18.32% in 1951 to 74.04% in 2011**, reflecting a substantial expansion of educational access after Independence.
- Male literacy increased from **27.15% to 82.14%**, while female literacy increased from **8.86% to 65.46%** during the same period.
- Rural literacy increased from **12.10% to 67.8%**, while urban literacy increased from **34.59% to 84.1%**.
- The improvement in female literacy has been particularly significant, although **rural women continue to experience a substantial literacy disadvantage**.
- The PLFS 2025 estimate of **81.1%** indicates continued progress beyond the Census 2011 level.

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School Education: Access, Retention and Learning:

Enrolment and Educational Progression:

- Literacy gains depend not only on school enrolment but also on **regular attendance, retention, transition and learning outcomes**.
- According to **UDISE+ 2025-26**, school enrolment exceeded **24.72 crore students**.
- The Gross Enrolment Ratio was **42.8% at the Foundational stage, 91.7% at the Preparatory stage, 89.6% at the Middle stage and 71.7% at the Secondary stage**.
- The dropout rate increased from **1.8% at the Preparatory stage to 3.6% at the Middle stage and 7% at the Secondary stage**.
- Retention declined from **98.5% at the Foundational stage to 51.9% at the Secondary stage**, indicating a major challenge in maintaining educational continuity.
- Transition rates were **99.2% from Foundational to Preparatory, 93.8% from Preparatory to Middle and 88.3% from Middle to Secondary**.

Learning Quality:

- Higher enrolment does not automatically ensure **functional literacy or meaningful learning outcomes**.
- Foundational reading, writing and numeracy skills acquired during the early years determine later educational progression and employability.
- Therefore, the policy focus must increasingly shift from **school access to learning outcomes, retention and competency attainment**.

Higher Education and Human Capital:

Expansion of Participation:

- Higher education enrolment increased from **3.42 crore in 2014-15 to 4.50 crore in 2023-24**.
- The higher education Gross Enrolment Ratio increased from **23.7% to 30%** during the same period.
- Higher education out-turn increased from **88.28 lakh to more than 1.09 crore** between 2014-15 and 2023-24.
- This expansion contributes to **human-capital formation, productivity, employability and social mobility** and supports the **National Education Policy 2020 target of 50% higher-education GER by 2035**.

Major Government Initiatives:

ULLAS – New India Literacy Programme:

- **ULLAS**, or the **New India Literacy Programme**, is a centrally sponsored adult-literacy programme implemented during **2022-27** for non-literate persons aged **15 years and above**.
- It targets **5 crore learners** with a financial outlay of **₹1,037.90 crore**.
- The programme integrates **foundational literacy and numeracy, critical life skills, digital literacy, financial literacy, legal literacy, basic education equivalency and vocational skills**.
- ULLAS follows a **hybrid learning model** based on volunteerism and **Janbhagidari**, using digital learning resources along with community-level support.
- About **4.03 crore learners** and more than **52.20 lakh volunteers** have registered, while more than **3.3 crore learners** have participated in the **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Test**.
- Between 2024 and 2026, **10 States/UTs** declared themselves fully literate: **Ladakh, Mizoram, Goa, Tripura, Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and Jammu and Kashmir**.

NIPUN Bharat Mission:

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- **NIPUN Bharat** was launched in **July 2021** under the **Samagra Shiksha** framework to achieve universal **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy**.
- The mission aims to ensure that children acquire foundational competencies by the end of **Grade 3**, with the target year **2026-27**, and focuses on the **Foundational Stage covering ages 3-8 years**.
- It addresses the critical relationship between **early learning, later educational achievement and human-capital formation**.

Supporting Education Schemes:

- **Samagra Shiksha** integrates school education from pre-school to senior secondary level, with emphasis on inclusion, foundational learning, teacher development and vocational education.
- **PM SHRI** seeks to develop more than **14,500 exemplar schools** demonstrating the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020.
- **PM e-VIDYA** integrates digital, online and broadcast learning platforms to expand access to educational content.
- **PM POSHAN** provides hot cooked meals to schoolchildren, linking **nutrition, attendance, retention and learning**.

Historical Evolution of Literacy Policy:

Pre-Independence and Colonial Period:

- Traditional education developed through institutions such as **Gurukuls, Viharas, Pathshalas, Maktabas and Madrasas**, but access to education was uneven across social and gender groups.
- **Macaulay's Minute of 1835** promoted English education and the **Downward Filtration Theory**, while subsequent policies gradually expanded institutional education.
- **Wood's Despatch of 1854** and the **Hunter Commission of 1882** addressed aspects of educational administration and primary education.

Post-Independence Nation-Building:

- **Article 45** of the original Constitution directed the State to endeavour to provide free and compulsory education to children up to the age of **14 years** within 10 years.
- The **Radhakrishnan Commission 1948-49** focused on higher education, while the **Kothari Commission 1964-66** provided a comprehensive framework for educational reform.
- The **National Policy on Education 1968** emphasised educational development, equalisation of opportunity and the **Three-Language Formula**.
- The **42nd Constitutional Amendment Act 1976** shifted education from the **State List to the Concurrent List**, enabling both the Union and State Governments to legislate on education.

Mass Literacy and Rights-Based Education:

- The **National Policy on Education 1986** and Programme of Action 1992 emphasised universalisation, removal of disparities and adult education.
- **Operation Blackboard** was launched in 1987 to improve basic infrastructure in primary schools.
- The **National Literacy Mission**, launched in 1988, promoted adult literacy through mass participation and volunteer-based campaigns.
- **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan**, launched in 2001, accelerated universalisation of elementary education.
- The **86th Constitutional Amendment Act 2002** inserted **Article 21A**, making free and compulsory education for children aged **6-14 years** a Fundamental Right.
- The **Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009** operationalised Article 21A.

Key Challenges in India's Literacy:

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Rural-Urban and Gender Disparities:

- The **11.6 percentage-point rural-urban literacy gap** in PLFS 2025 demonstrates that geographical inequality remains significant.
- Rural female literacy at **70.3%** remains substantially below rural male literacy at **84.8%**, indicating the combined impact of gender and location.

Secondary-Stage Attrition:

- The **7% secondary-stage dropout rate** and **51.9% retention rate** under UDISE+ 2025-26 demonstrate that keeping students in education after the elementary stages remains a major challenge.
- Economic vulnerability, household responsibilities, early entry into work and inadequate support systems can contribute to discontinuation of education.

Digital and Functional Literacy:

- Contemporary literacy increasingly requires **digital, financial, legal, numerical and information-processing skills**, rather than only the ability to read and write.
- The expansion of digital public infrastructure therefore makes **digital literacy and equitable access to technology** essential components of inclusive development.

Quality and Learning Outcomes:

- High enrolment can coexist with weak foundational competencies if classroom learning does not translate into actual reading, writing and numeracy skills.
- The policy challenge is therefore shifting from **access and enrolment to competency, retention and learning outcomes**.

Literacy and Viksit Bharat:

Human Capital and Inclusive Development:

- Literacy strengthens **women's empowerment, employability, productivity, social participation and economic inclusion**.
- Adult literacy can improve the ability of citizens to access welfare programmes, financial services, digital public services and legal rights.
- Foundational literacy and numeracy provide the base for **lifelong learning and future-ready skills**.
- Literacy therefore contributes directly to **human-capital formation** and the broader objective of **Viksit Bharat 2047**.

Sustainable Development Goal Linkage:

- Literacy is directly linked with **Sustainable Development Goal 4**, which seeks inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- India's literacy strategy therefore connects domestic educational objectives with the global framework of **inclusive human development**.

Way Forward:

From Access to Outcomes:

- Educational monitoring should increasingly measure **learning competencies, foundational skills, retention and transition**, rather than enrolment alone.

- Early identification of learning gaps should be followed by targeted remedial support and teacher capacity-building.

Strengthening Adult Literacy:

- **ULLAS** can be strengthened through greater participation of local institutions, volunteers, self-help groups and community organisations.
- Adult literacy should be integrated with **financial, digital, legal, health and vocational literacy** so that literacy produces tangible improvements in everyday life.

Reducing Secondary Dropouts:

- States should identify class-wise and region-specific causes of secondary-stage attrition and strengthen targeted interventions.
- **Vocational education, career guidance, scholarships, transport, sanitation and safe learning environments** can improve the ability of vulnerable students to remain in school.

Bridging the Digital Divide:

- Digital literacy programmes should be accompanied by affordable devices, reliable connectivity and accessible learning resources.
- Rural and disadvantaged learners require targeted support to prevent digitalisation from creating a new layer of educational inequality.

Conclusion:

- India has made substantial progress in literacy, with the **PLFS 2025 literacy rate reaching 81.1%**, but the remaining challenge is increasingly one of **quality, equity and continuity**.
- The **rural-urban gap, gender disparity, secondary-stage attrition and learning-quality deficit** require sustained policy attention.
- The combined approach of **ULLAS, NIPUN Bharat, Samagra Shiksha, PM SHRI, PM e-VIDYA and PM POSHAN** addresses different stages of the literacy and education ecosystem.
- Achieving meaningful literacy for Viksit Bharat will require moving beyond the ability to read and write towards **foundational competencies, lifelong learning, digital capability, employable skills and equal educational opportunity**.

Value Addition for UPSC:

- **Prelims:** Remember **PLFS 2025: 81.1% overall literacy, 89% urban, 77.4% rural, 84.8% rural male and 70.3% rural female**.
- **Prelims:** Remember the **95% benchmark for full literacy** under the ULLAS framework and the **10 States/UTs** that declared full literacy between 2024 and 2026.
- **GS Paper II:** Link literacy with **Article 21A, Right to Education, Directive Principles, social justice and inclusive education**.
- **GS Paper II:** Use **ULLAS** for adult literacy and **NIPUN Bharat** for foundational literacy and numeracy.
- **GS Paper III:** Connect literacy with **human capital, productivity, employability, demographic dividend and economic participation**.
- **Essay:** The transition from **“literacy as access” to “literacy as capability”** captures the central challenge of India’s next phase of educational development.