



Literacy for All

India's Journey Towards Viksit Bharat

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India's Literacy Leap: Charting the Path to Full Literacy

Literacy is a foundation of national development. Beyond being an indicator of educational progress, it enables individuals to access opportunities, participate in the economy, and engage meaningfully in society. UNESCO recognises literacy as a fundamental human right and a significant driver of achieving equality, justice, inclusion, and respect for the rule of law. India has made significant strides in improving its literacy rate over the past eight decades. In 1947, the country's overall literacy rate stood at just 14%, while female literacy was remarkably low at 8%. India has undertaken several initiatives over the years to improve literacy and strengthen its education system. The government introduced the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** to reform education at all levels and develop a skilled, adaptable, and future-ready workforce.

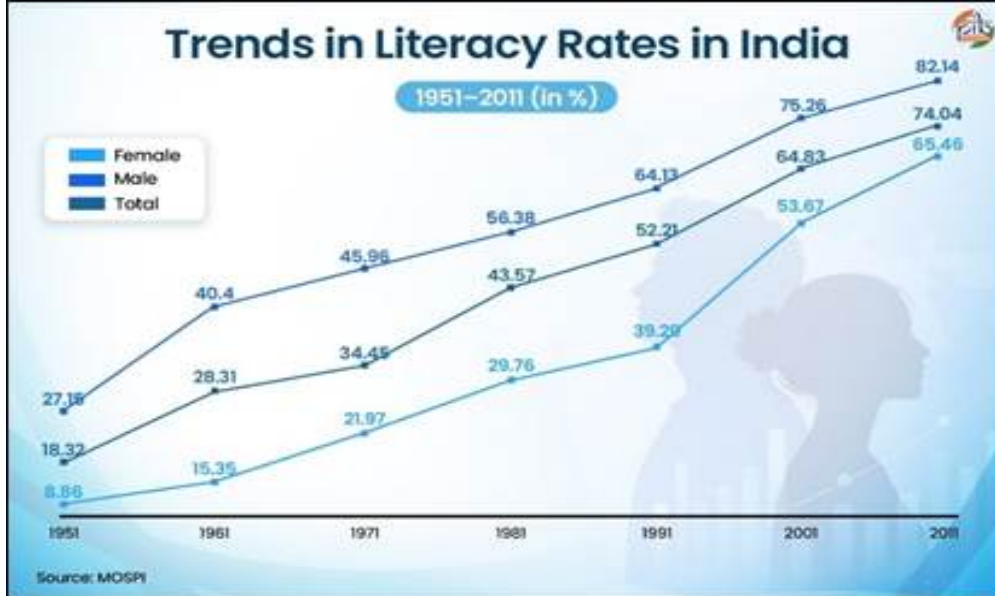
What is Literacy?

The **Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Education, for the first time defines Literacy** as “the ability to read, write, and compute with comprehension, i.e., to identify, understand, interpret and create, along with critical life skills such as digital literacy, financial literacy, etc.” It considers **95% literacy** in a State/Union Territory as equivalent to full literacy.

In a global context, UNESCO defines Literacy as the ability to read, write, and use numbers, as well as to use digital materials to solve problems in an increasingly technological and information-rich environment—a foundational skill that is central to individuals' engagement in work, learning, and life. It is an essential component of the right to education and a prerequisite for enjoying other human rights.

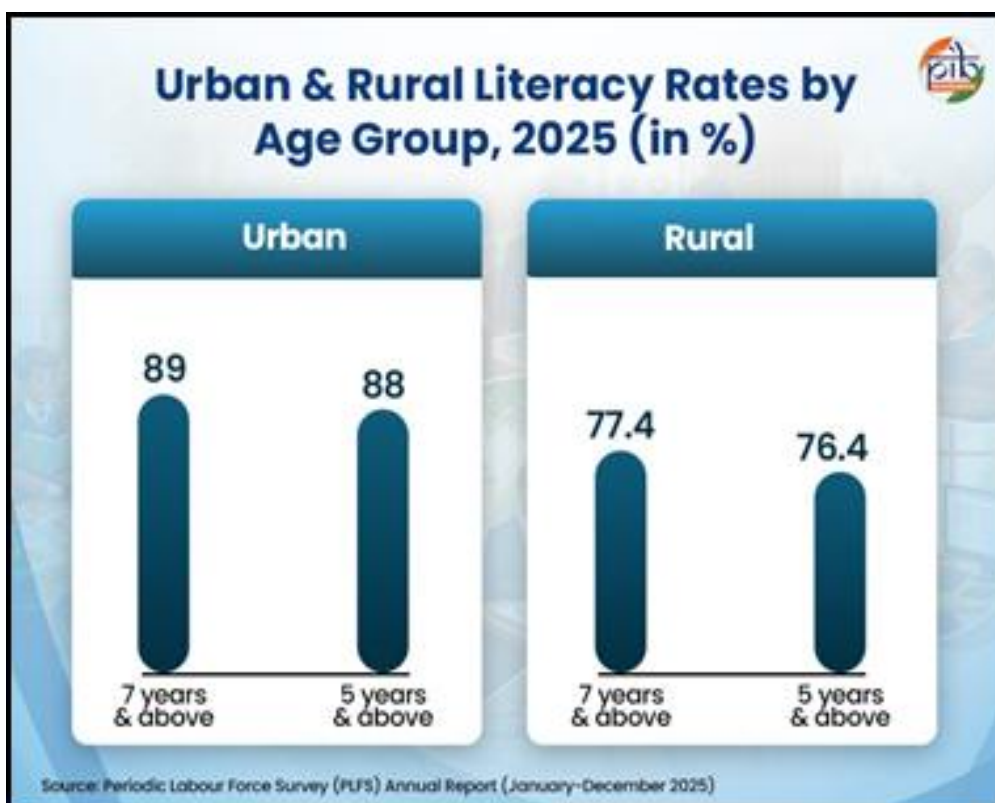
Measuring Progress in Literacy and Education

India's literacy rate has made remarkable progress since 1951, increasing from 18.32% in 1951 to **74.04%** in 2011. Male literacy rose from 27.15% to **82.14%**, while female literacy increased significantly from 8.86% to **65.46%**.



The urban literacy rate increased from 34.59% in 1951 to **84.1%** in 2011, while the rural literacy rate rose from 12.10% to **67.8%**. Between 2001 and 2011, rural female literacy grew by **26%**, compared with **10%** for rural males, reflecting significant gains in female literacy.

According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2025, the literacy rate in **urban areas** reached **89% for those aged 7 years and above**, and **88% for those aged 5 years and above**. Among urban residents aged 7 years and above, literacy reached **93.1% for males and 84.8% for females**. In rural areas, the literacy rate among those aged 7 years and above was 77.4%, and 76.4% for those aged 5 years and above. Among the rural population aged 7 years and above, the literacy rate was **84.8% for males and 70.3% for females**. **The overall Literacy rate of the country is 81.1 % as per this survey.**



To complement literacy gains, the government has also taken measures to improve school enrolment, retention, and progression. Notable improvements in Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), transition, and retention rates have been noted since 2014-15. According to the UDISE+ Report (2025-26):

- **School Enrolment:** Over **24.72 crore** students were enrolled in schools.
- **Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER):** Stood at **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.

- **Dropout rates** were **1.8%** at the Preparatory stage, **3.6%** at the Middle stage, and **7.0%** at the Secondary stage.
- **Retention rates** stood at **98.5%** for Foundational, **91.1%** for Preparatory, **83.7%** for Middle, and **51.9%** for Secondary stages.
- **Transition rates** improved, with **99.2%** progressing from the Foundational to the Preparatory stage, **93.8%** from Preparatory to the Middle stage, and **88.3%** from Middle to the Secondary stage.

The transition rate refers to the percentage of students who successfully move from one level of education to the next.

Participation in higher education has expanded significantly over the past decade:

- Enrolment increased from 3.42 crore in 2014-15 to **4.50 crore** in 2023-24.
- GER increased from 23.7% to **30%** over the same period.
- Higher education out-turn increased from 88.28 lakh in 2014-15 to over **1.09 crore** in 2023-24.

Higher education out-turn refers to the total number of students who pass out of higher education institutions in a given academic year.

The increase in women's participation, alongside the inclusion of SC, ST, and other disadvantaged groups, reflects enhanced access and equity. It reflects continued improvement in access to higher education, supporting NEP 2020's target of attaining a 50% higher education GER by 2035.

Key Government Initiatives for Advancing Literacy

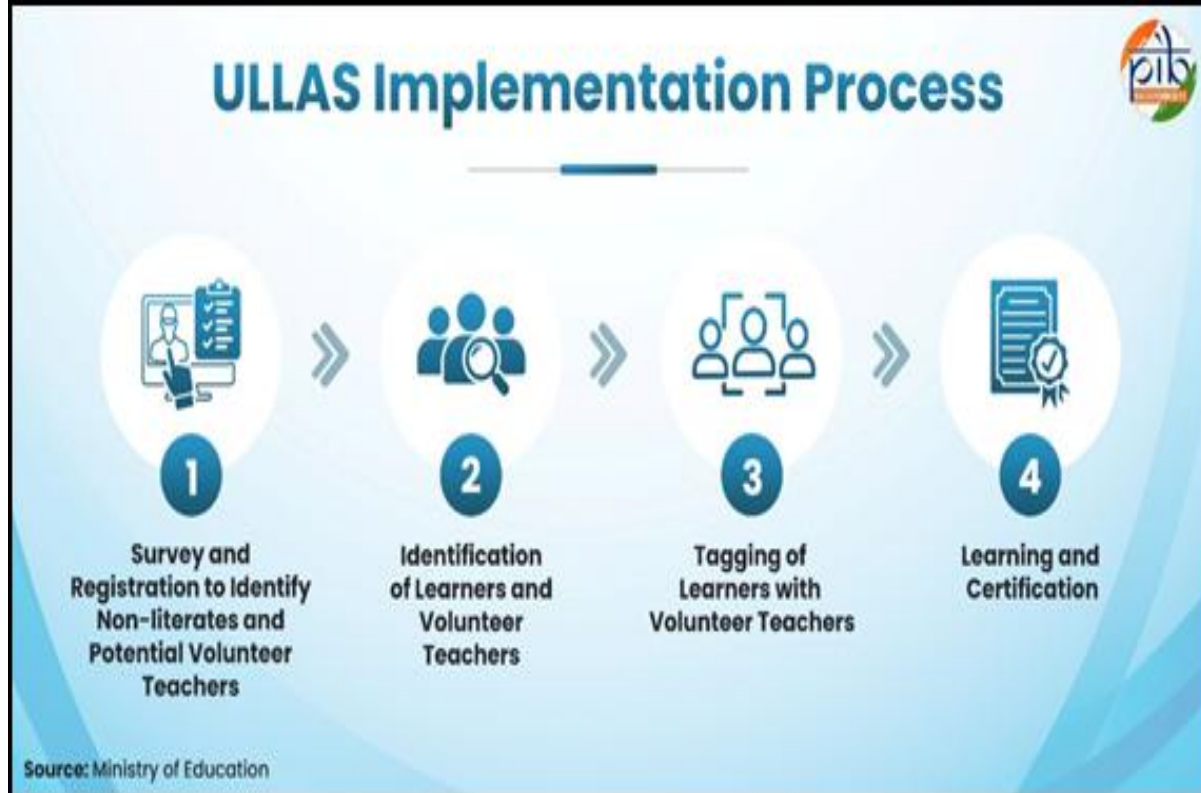
India's approach to literacy has evolved from basic reading and numeracy to broader competencies needed to participate in a rapidly changing economy and society. In line with NEP 2020, the Government has introduced initiatives such as ULLAS and NIPUN Bharat to expand access, strengthen learning outcomes, promote inclusion, and support lifelong learning.

ULLAS (Understanding of Lifelong Learning for All in Society)

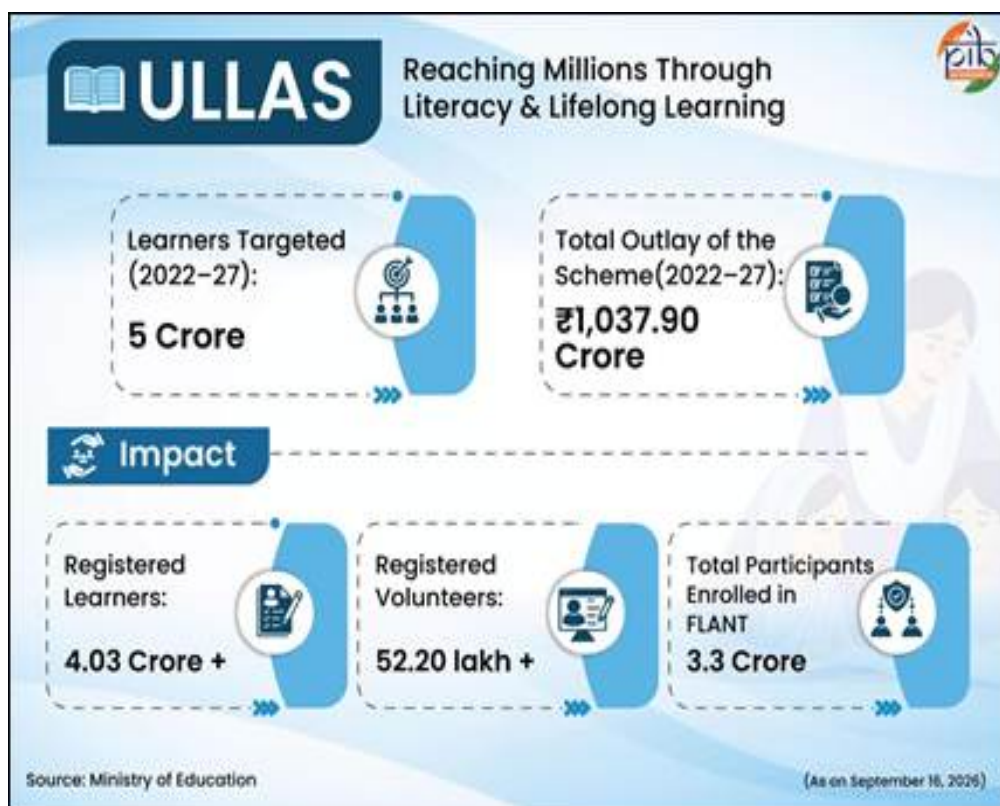
ULLAS - Nav Bharat Saaksharta Karyakram: ULLAS, or the **New India Literacy Programme (NILP)**, is a centrally sponsored initiative. It aligns with **NEP 2020**. It focuses on empowering adults aged 15 years and above who missed formal schooling. The programme provides functional literacy, numeracy, critical life skills, and lifelong learning opportunities. This promotes the social integration of the target group and encourages their contribution to national development.

ULLAS's vision is '**Jan Jan Saakshar**', empowering every individual through literacy. It follows the spirit of '**Kartavya Bodh**' (Duty). It promotes **volunteerism** and **Janbhagidari**, or community participation, to achieve universal literacy.

ULLAS follows a hybrid learning approach. The **ULLAS App**, available on **iOS** and **Android** platforms, has teaching-learning material in **27 languages**. Under the scheme, learners and volunteers are identified by surveyors at the district- or block-level. They may include school teachers, civil society workers, ASHA workers, and Anganwadi workers. Surveyors conduct door-to-door surveys to identify non-literate individuals and potential volunteer teachers. In the next stage, learners are connected with a Voluntary Teacher to support and guide the students in registering on the **ULLAS App**. Training, orientations, and workshops are conducted through face-to-face and online modes. Learners access learning materials and develop foundational literacy and numeracy skills. They then appear for the **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Test (FLNAT)**, followed by evaluation and certification.



ULLAS's Progress and Impact: The scheme aims to cover **5 crore** learners during 2022-27 with a financial outlay of **₹1,037.90 crore**. ULLAS has about **4.03 crore** registered learners and over **52.20 lakh** volunteers. To date, more than **3.3 crore** learners have participated in the FLNAT.



Ten (10) States/UTs have declared themselves fully literate between 2024 and 2026. These include Ladakh, Mizoram, Goa, Tripura, Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and Jammu & Kashmir. ULLAS is expanding adult literacy through community participation, reaching millions of learners while advancing India's goal of universal literacy.

NIPUN Bharat: (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy)

Launched in July 2021, under the aegis of **Samagra Shiksha**, the initiative focuses on strengthening early learning and supporting continued academic development. It seeks to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy by 2026-27, ensuring that every child acquires foundational skills by Grade 2. The

mission focuses on the Foundational Stage of ages 3 to 8 years.

In addition, the Government has undertaken several initiatives to increase enrolment and improve retention in schools. Key initiatives include **Samagra Shiksha, PM SHRI (Pradhan Mantri Schools for Rising India), PM e-VIDYA, and PM POSHAN (Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman).**

- **Samagra Shiksha** focuses on enhancing **school effectiveness and ensuring equal opportunities for schooling to improve learning outcomes.** The scheme is aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) on education. It was introduced by subsuming the three erstwhile schemes-Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), and Teacher Education (TE). The scheme promotes equitable, inclusive, and quality education, with a focus on foundational learning, teacher development, and vocational integration.
- **Pradhan Mantri Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI)** seeks to strengthen more than **14,500 exemplar schools** across the country. The scheme focuses on the holistic and well-rounded development of students by fostering an equitable, inclusive, and joyful learning environment that addresses diverse backgrounds, multilingual needs, and varied academic abilities.
- **PM e-VIDYA** is a comprehensive initiative that brings together various efforts related to digital, online, and on-air education to provide multi-mode access to learning. The initiative is expected to benefit nearly **25 crore** school-going children across the country.
- **PM POSHAN** is a centrally sponsored scheme that provides one hot cooked meal to **11.20 crore students** enrolled in Bal Vatikas and Classes I to VIII across **10.36 lakh** government and government-aided schools on all school days. The scheme aims to provide nutritional support and encourage greater school participation among students.

Together, these initiatives create an enabling environment that enhances enrolment, retention, and learning outcomes. They also address literacy across age groups and learning stages, strengthening foundational education, adult literacy, and lifelong learning.

Literacy for Viksit Bharat and Sustainable Development

The SDGs provide a comprehensive framework for promoting a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable future for all. Literacy and education are central to **SDG 4**, which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Literacy is positively associated with GDP and per capita income and contributes to economic growth and national development. For India, achieving the vision of **Viksit Bharat** requires a literate, educated, and skilled population.

Beyond education, literacy contributes to women's empowerment, equality, inclusion, and the realisation of human rights, while enhancing employability, productivity, innovation, and economic participation. Education and skills can also enable participation in green jobs, support the circular economy, and contribute to environmental sustainability. Thus, progress in literacy can create multiplier effects across the SDGs, supporting inclusive, sustainable, and broad-based development.

Looking Ahead: Advancing Literacy for All

India's literacy journey since Independence reflects a wider transformation in nation-building and human development. Literacy today extends beyond reading and writing. It enables learning, livelihoods, empowerment, and meaningful participation in society. Initiatives such as **NEP 2020, ULLAS, and NIPUN Bharat** are broadening this vision. They connect **foundational learning** with **adult education, lifelong learning, and future-ready skills.** Aligned with **SDG 4**, these efforts reinforce India's commitment to inclusive and equitable development.

As India moves towards Viksit Bharat, sustained implementation remains essential. Greater attention to regional and gender disparities will help ensure that the benefits of literacy reach every section of society. A literate, skilled, and empowered population can become a strong foundation for a more inclusive,

productive, and sustainable Viksit Bharat.

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