

# **A Brief Study of Illiteracy in India**

**Dr. Balram C. Gowda , Prof. Vishal Chavria and Shankar Datt Joshi**

The Byramjee Jeejeebhoy College of Commerce, Mumbai, Maharashtra

**Abstract:** *Illiteracy remains a pervasive issue in India, despite significant progress in education over the years. This abstract provides an overview of the current state of illiteracy in India, highlighting key factors contributing to its persistence. It also discusses the socio- economic implications and offers potential solutions to combat this longstanding problem. Illiteracy in India continues to affect a substantial portion of the population, particularly in rural areas and among marginalized communities. Factors such as poverty, limited access to quality education, gender disparities, and regional variations play a significant role in perpetuating illiteracy. Despite government initiatives like the Right to Education Act, which aims to provide free and compulsory education to children, challenges in implementation and quality of education persist. Addressing illiteracy in India requires a multi-pronged approach. This includes improving the quality of education, especially in rural and underserved areas, addressing gender disparities in education, and promoting adult literacy programs. Additionally, efforts to raise awareness about the importance of education and mobilize communities to support literacy initiatives are crucial. In conclusion, while India has made significant strides in education, illiteracy remains a pressing issue with wide-ranging social and economic consequences. Sustained efforts, both at the policy and grassroots levels, are essential to eliminate illiteracy and empower individuals to lead more fulfilling and productive lives*

**Keywords:** Illiteracy, right to education, schemes, socio-economic conditions

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Illiteracy in our country is by far the most serious problem. We all recognize that illiteracy is bad and that it prevents the cultural growth of a people. But illiteracy in our country continues to exist on an appalling scale. Even today among ten in India about four are illiterate. Nor is there any organized effort to do away with this deplorable state of backlog. We tinker at the problem instead of tackling it thoroughly. We made experiments.

The States have ambitious programmes of setting up primary schools in every village, but these are yet in the cold shade of neglect. But illiteracy can be removed, if concerted efforts are made both by private organizations and the states. Within a decade, the Russians got rid of ignorance as colossal as ours; and now the Chinese have also achieved it.

They took a total war against illiteracy for which the services of all educated men and women were conscripted. For this, education must be made free and compulsory at least up to the age of fourteen. That is the plain directive of our Constitution. Recently a bill was adopted in the Parliament of India to make primary education a fundamental right. But even where education is free in India, it is not compulsory; and it is free only at the lower primary stage here and there.

The result is that most of those who give up learning after this stage are the drop-outs, lapse back, into ignorance. Of course, making elementary education compulsory demands money. Children of workers and peasants have to think of earning before they can think of learning. Mahatma Gandhi recognized this basic difficulty and he suggested a scheme by which children would begin to earn while they were learning. In that scheme, known as basic Education scheme, it is not only craft-centered, but the crafts are so chosen as to have a profit basis.

The scheme however did not make much headway in free India. The function of education should be to direct the child's creative instincts properly. This has been ignored in the basis pattern advocated by Gandhi ji. The problem can be solved only by recognition of the fact that education must be the primary responsibility of the State. It must be given a high priority. Voluntary efforts can only touch a fringe of the problem. However, in a District of Kerala recently hundred percent literacy was achieved through combined efforts of the public and the government.

A scheme of having a network of primary schools has been drawn up. Provisions for financing the scheme have also been made. If implemented, it will mean the first step towards a nation-wide programme of fight against the curse of illiteracy.

The problem of illiteracy in India will not be solved only by providing education for the children. Illiteracy is rampant among the older generation of people, particularly in the rural areas: and not a little of our social and culture backwardness is due to this. Campaign among the illiterate adults, therefore, is also a crying necessity. Adult education has so long been only a piecemeal, voluntary affair. However, it has now found a place in the different schemes and projects of the Government. But much ground has not yet been covered to step up primary education.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

#### **Objectives Of The National Literacy Mission (NLM)**

The entire National Literacy Mission was aimed to mainly ensure that each citizen of the country gets an equal opportunity of education and a chance to enhance their skill set by making the best use of education. The major National Literacy Mission objectives and aims are as follows:

- 1: The aim was to undertake a full scale literacy campaign which would be of a sustainable threshold level touching the minimum mark of 75% of the population by the year 2007. The mission sought to fulfill this goal by imparting functional literacy to non-literates from the age of 15 to 35.
- 2: The objective was also to make all of the citizens self-reliant but alongside identifying and getting aware of the underlying causes of deprivation of education and going forward towards the amelioration of the condition by making every citizen a part of the process of development by helping people make the most out of education.
- 3: Helping with skill enhancement to improve the general well being and economic status of the people of the country.
- 4: Helping the students imbibe values of national integration, women's equality, conservation of the environment, observance of the nuclear family norms and the like.
- 5: Catalysing the reduction in gender gap in literacy by 10%.
- 6: Helping with the reduction of gender, social, and regional disparities in the educational spheres

#### **Results of The National Literacy Mission**

The National Literacy Mission (NLM) resulted in the following major outcomes:

- 1: It has been able to cover 597 districts in the country under various literacy programmes. Out of this 174 districts are not in Post Literacy Programmes and 328 districts in the continuing education phase
- 2: All the Literacy Programmes sanctioned by the National Literacy Mission were estimated to cover approximately 150 million Neo literates out of which 125.6 Million people have already been made literate under the programmes of National Literacy Mission.
- 3: The existing gender disparity could be curtailed to a big extent as 60% of the learners during these literacy campaigns have been females while 40% of them were men.
- 4: These literacy programmes also catered to the disadvantaged sections of the society as 23% learners were seen to belong to the Scheduled Castes while 12% belong to the Scheduled Tribes.
- 5: The cumulative number of literary volunteers who were mobilised since the launching of literary campaigns were estimated to be approximately 15 million.
- 6: With the rampant spread of this programme, the literacy rate of the country also increased from 52.21% in 1991 to 65.37% in 2001, registering one of the highest decadal growth in literacy.

## **II. OVERVIEW OF ILLITERACY IN INDIA**

### **What is Literacy?**

Literacy is defined as the ability to read and write. It is an evolving concept which not only entails the grasping abilities of printed text but also the abilities to adapt visual entities and technological awareness as well. It happens

to be a multi-dimensional concept which keeps on adding new parameters to it with respect to the developments that are taking place in a globalized world. According to the UNESCO, "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals to develop their knowledge and potential and to participate fully in their community and wider society".

### **Causes of illiteracy in India?**

Illiteracy in India is a problem which has complex dimensions attached to it. Illiteracy in India is more or less concerned with different forms of disparities that exist in the country. There are gender imbalances, income imbalances, state imbalances, caste imbalances, technological barriers which shape the literacy rates that exist in the country. India possesses the largest illiterate population. Literacy rates stood at 82.14 percent for men in 2011 and 65.46 percent for women. This low female literacy is also responsible for the dependency of women on men for activities which requires them to read and write. Thus, this all leads to the formation of a vicious circle. Again, it is no new concept that the rich households will have better access to educational facilities as compared to the poor households. Poor households due to the lack of skills and knowledge involve themselves with unskilled labor in order to save bread for the family thus, this reduces the focus from achieving education as the main focus deviates to earning income so as to be able to survive in the society. States that spend more on education seem to have a higher literacy rate as to the states which do not invest heavily on education. Kerala is a case in point. The state spends 685 dollars per pupil which also explains its educational levels.

One of the primary reasons for dismal literacy rates is inadequate school facilities. The teaching staff that is employed across the government-run schools is inefficient and unqualified. Another reason which leads to the maximum dropouts among the children is the lack of proper sanitation. A study has stated that 59 percent of the schools do not have drinking water facilities. There is a shortage of teachers as well.

When it comes to laying the blame for the perpetual lackadaisical state of the reading and comprehension levels of the population, the already literate junta is quick to point to the politicians. The politicians on the other hand, blame the people and sometimes even the occasional book publisher for a whole theme park of assaults ranging from lack of teachers to the high price of text books.

However, a quick adjustment of perspective, from the micro to the macro and from the immediate to the abstract, puts the spotlight on the combined economic and population management problems in India as being the root cause of an illiterate India.

### **How economic problems in India?**

Exacerbate poverty or the case for renewed literacy programs in India

The chicken and the egg problem. There is no better way to describe the debilitating relationship between poverty and unemployment in India. Unless you're graphing the correlation between both of these concepts, establishing a framework that makes working to solve these problems both important and impossible at the same time.

Poverty at its core is a life crippling condition. But literacy, is not. Circa 1881, the illiterate zamindar (who can't read, but for some reason still keeps stellar and mildly oppressive books of accounts) and an illiterate farmer. In this situation, the acquisition of money makes for a better wager than the acquisition of literacy, ergo education. Fast forward to 2012, and the situation is well, reversed. While the current rate of computer literacy in India is acceptable, we still treat ourselves as a third-world country, what many an NGO has found that it is not the technology that is a problem, but the fact that people can't read.

Providing computers and the pre-requisite electricity to run them is entirely possible. In a village, if you're at a high school level reading in Indian standard terms, you could learn pretty much anything you want. With computers and the fact that you can download the entirety of Wikipedia to a USB thumb drive the size of your,

### **The effects of illiteracy in India:**

The biggest effect of illiteracy in India is poverty, as per our study. Poverty also happens to be the single biggest cause of illiteracy in India and a precursor to all other effects. The inability to attain basic, nutritious and potable

water are the more popularly quoted effects of poverty in India, but the king of the hill when it comes to effects that can fracture an individual remains illiteracy. After all, it is one of those things that actually lets people pick themselves up and out of poverty, even if they have to do it by the way of their bootstraps. The thing about illiteracy in India and its effects is that they all compound together to form a burden that is passed on from generation to generation and if history is any indication, it is one that has been increasing with each generational shift and with each year added to the calendar.

#### **Why should you be concerned about the problem of illiteracy in India:**

The one thing that is clear from the graph above is that enough isn't being to push for the speedy eradication of illiteracy in India. If someone asked you to pick one single metric as a staple barometer of a nation's potential and prospect, it would be literacy. More so for a nation like ours that will have more than 40% of our population in the sub-35 age group in 2015. While the current stance of letting bygones being bygones that the government has adopted as the de-facto response to flanging adult literacy programs in India, has been disappointing, it is the state of the upward growth of child illiteracy in India that is the most alarming of the lot! If I had to pick one single statistic to get the unconcerned citizen initiated, then this would be it. While the plight of the street children in India might not be something that piques your interest beyond the occasional pang of privileged guilt, it really should. After all, the money to support the increasing population of the uneducated is going to come out of your pocket whether you like it or not –taxes. Taxes whether to feed them and clothe them or to keep them from feeding into the veins of the criminal underbelly of your city, the cost of ignoring the problem will eventually come to haunt us all, rich or poor.

#### **Making the removal of illiteracy in India a national priority:**

As far as poverty eradication programs go, the government has been working on trying to get ahead of this problem since the British sun set on our country. However, there is still need to impress upon the populace that education is the very string that is holding India back and it is, for the purpose of a generalized discussion, what the web of socio-economic issues in India is made out of. The government as well as various NGOs have been working on solving the seemingly insurmountable problem of how we can eradicate illiteracy in India for both children and adults.

Everything from basic financial literacy programs to using computers to help adults learn how to read in less than 24 hours is on the table. While too many cooks may spoil the broth, this particular problem is so complex and multi-headed that we need more, not fewer solutions.

#### **The development of education and why new approaches:**

help with Indian literacy Over the last decade, the new approaches that have come from the government have mostly been in the form of programs as opposed to changes in policy.

Even Kapil Sibbal's supremely ambitious plan that entails every student in the country being given a tablet computer, is something that is pushed by the Ministry of Education as a program me. The biggest problem with programs per se, is the predictable demise in the effort being put into them after the parliament changes hands. It is therefore left up to NGOs to pick up the functionally successful programs that have fallen out of favor. The biggest example of this is how the Teach India foundation picked up the "Each One, Teach One" campaign.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

The last two decades have shown enormous improvement in the literacy scene in the country as Reflected by the average literacy figures. Yet, the country has more than 300 million illiterates (7+Age group). Where are they and who are they? Though illiteracy still remains to be wiped out in Every state, the burden in terms of numbers seems to be carried by a few states, namely, Uttar

Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Not Surprisingly, analysis shows that the gender disparity is also higher in these states. A positive feature is that some of these

states like Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh have recorded very substantial Increase in female literacy between 1991 and 2001 indicating the possibility of reducing gender Disparity fairly quickly, if the trend continues.

Though most of the so-called educationally backward states have contributed positively towards the Decline in the number of illiterates in the country, Bihar remains a classic case of under Development, where slow progress in literacy and high growth of population have made a huge Addition to the pool of illiterates in the country.

It is important to note that educational development is not uniformly poor in all these states. For Instance, Maharashtra is among the leading states in overall status of primary education as well as Literacy. This points to the existence of intra-state disparities that are as important as inter-state Disparities. In this context it is significant to note that in 20% districts, the average literacy rate is Below 50%. When female literacy is considered, more than 40% districts are found to show less than 50% literacy rate. Around 65% of illiterates are found concentrated in 7 states, and 67 districts Across 9 major states have million plus illiterates which together account for around 30% of the Illiterates in 2001.

In other words, it is these states and districts, which need special efforts for reducing illiteracy Whether through direct adult literacy programmes or through intensified programmes of primary

Education. Examining the changing age profile of literates reveals that the literacy rate has increased Steadily since 1961, in all age groups. In fact, the trajectory of change clearly indicates that the

Increase has come essentially due to increased primary school participation. Further, what is Alarming is that an estimated 22.65 million children in the age group 15-19 were illiterates.

Youth Illiteracy (age group 15-29) appeared to be quite high with an estimated number of around 79 million illiterates. Analysis of the NSS, 55th round data shows that the literacy rates of socio- economically disadvantaged groups such as the Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes continue to be very low, particularly in the educationally backward states in the Hindi heartland and Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. More revealing is the fact that the illiteracy rates of casual and agricultural labourers are relatively very high in these states. Who are illiterates is a difficult proposition to examine, as many factors including their location in different states matter significantly? Illiterates are found across all demographic, socio-economic and age groups, showing that inefficiency in primary education continue to be a major factor for continuation of illiteracy. Illiterates are relatively more in rural areas because of obvious reasons and females are substantially higher with a differential of 24% found in 2001. An overarching observation is that irrespective of location, gender and religion, poverty continues to be the most important determining factor.

Taking concentration of agricultural labourers as a proxy for poverty levels, it was found that presence of illiterates and agricultural labourers particularly among female population goes hand in hand in most of the states. As per NSS, 55th round, the illiteracy level and the Monthly Per Capita Consumer Expenditure (MPCE) and the illiteracy rate are inversely related to each other, both in rural and urban areas, thereby further supporting our argument that poverty is one of the critical factors determining literacy level of households in India.

#### REFERENCES

- [1]. Basu, Kaushik, Foster James E., and Subramanian, S. (2000), Isolated and Proximate Illiteracy and Paper No. 00-W02, Vanderbilt University, Nashville
- [2]. Census of India (2001), Provisional Population Totals, Series 1), India, Paper 1, 2001. Web edition, New Delhi.
- [3]. Census of India (2001), Report and Tables on Age, Series 1, Volume 1, New Delhi.
- [4]. Drez, Jean and Sen, Amartya (1995), India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity. Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- [5]. Gupta, Shaibal (2000), Status of Literacy in India. Asian Development research Institute,
- [6]. Pape represented at the Summer Literacy Training Programme (SLTP), 2000, International literacy Institute, University of Philadelphia, July 5-28, 2000