

D. PULLA RAO

INTRODUCTION

LITERACY IS an important element of transformation of economic and political development. India today, in its context of demographic evolution, badly stands in need of an accelerated literacy transition which alone can serve the cause of continuing of growing population which poses a serious danger to the country. A thrust on rural literacy assumes special significance in the context of India where more than 70 per cent of the India's population lives in rural areas. The number of rural illiterates in India is more than the total combined population of Japan, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. India has undoubtedly recorded a phenomenal growth in literacy since Independence. Urban literacy, has, no doubt, improved significantly. However, the malaise still persists. Rural areas characterised by a literate majority continue to be primarily concentrated on the east, north west and southern coastal areas while vast rural areas in the rest of the country have yet to free themselves from the curse of illiteracy resulting in lower general literacy. In rural areas, more than two-fifths of the population is still illiterate. Urban-rural literacy disparity calls for more vigorous efforts especially among the rural female population.

Definition of Literacy

The definition of literacy varies from country to country and is based upon its existing social and educational patterns and upon different concepts of urban and rural life. Literacy has been commonly accepted as a state in which an individual possesses mastery over symbols in written form and is able to code or decode written messages that is knowledge and skill to read and write. However, literacy goes much beyond this simple definition. The International Liaison Committee for Literacy has defined "Literacy is not the simple reading of a word or set of associated sounds, but an act of critical understanding of any situation in life" (UNESCO 1972).

United Nations Development Programme defines literates as those who can with understanding; both read and write, a short, simple statement to their everyday life. According to this definition, the least developed

14 D. PULLA RAO

of the world had an average adult literacy rate (i.e., the percentage of people aged 15 and above) of 53.3 per cent in 2001. (U.N.2003). The developed and less developed countries presented a contrast with regard to levels of literacy. Although non-availability of comparable specific data on literacy of various countries restricts our analysis in this regard yet it is possible to state with reasonable confidence that while the developed countries are fortunate in having universal adult literacy, in case of the less and least developed countries the corresponding figures are depressingly low. Developed countries like U.S.A., Canada, Japan, Australia etc. achieved almost universal literacy and education with a negligible proportion of illiterates. Developing countries, on the threshold of development, exhibited an adult literacy rate of 74.5 percent (U.N.2003).

The most recent Indian census of 2001, however registered a literacy rate of 65.20 per cent which varies considerably from the above mentioned U.N.figures. This is so because the 2001 India census defines literate as "a person aged seven and above who can both read and write with understanding in any language". A person, who can only read but cannot write, is not deemed to be literate. It is not necessary that to be treated as literate, a person should have received any formal education or passed any minimum educational standard. Literacy could also have been achieved through adult classes or through any non-formal educational system.

Trends of Literacy In India

All India average of percentage of literacy in the country was 5.36 per cent in 1901. The literacy ratio of male was 9.80 per cent and female less than one (0.60). In 1931 the average literacy rate was 9.51. During 30 years of period there was no more change in this rate. The drastic change started after 1941.

In the period from 1901 to 1931, the spread of literacy in India was almost stagnant. In 30 years, it is increased from 5.36 per cent to 9.51 per cent. After 1931, there was steady growth in the literacy percentage. In the period between 1931 and 2001, the literacy expansion was almost seven times, i.e., from 9.51 per cent to 65.20 per cent. This positive trend can be seen both in the case of male as well as female literacy in the Table 1.

Urban-Rural Literacy Rates In India

After Independence, India has recorded a significant development in the field of literacy and education. Total eradication of illiteracy is an elusive goal in India. The overall literacy rate has shown a steady increase in every successive decade from 1951 to 2001. It has increased from 18.33 per cent in 1951 to 65.38 per cent in 2001. Rural literacy in India increased from

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 10 September 2009 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 30 September 2010 04:24

DISPARITIES IN LITERACY RATES IN INDIA 15

TABLE 1: LITERACY IN INDIA (1901-2001)

Year	Age Group	In Million			Literacy(In Per cent)		
		Population	Illiterates	Literate	Persons	Males	Females
1901	All	235.1	225.5	12.6	5.36	9.8	0.6
1911	All	248.2	233.5	14.7	5.92	10.6	1
1921	All	246.7	229	17.7	7.17	12.2	1.8
1931	All	273.4	247.4	26	9.51	15.6	2.9
1941	All	312	261.8	50.2	16.09	25	7.3
1951	5 and above	316.1	300	60.19	18.33	27.2	8.9
1961	5 and above	372.84	267.3	105.52	28.3	40.4	15.3
1971	5 and above	468.6	307.1	161.41	34.45	45.95	22
1981	7 and above	581.78	340.7	241.03	41.43	56.5	29.8
1991	7 and above	688.16	328.8	359.28	52.21	64.1	39.3
2001	7 and above	869.15	302.44	566.71	65.2	75.8	54.2

SOURCES: Census India, Various Issues.

12.10 per cent in 1951 to 59.40 per cent in 2001 (Table 2). A comparison of increase in overall and rural literacy rates during the second half of the 20th Century is quite significant. Both have shown a steady increase in every successive decade. The overall and rural literacy rates in 1951 were 18.33 and 12.10 per cent respectively. In 2001 they stood at 65.38 and 59.40 per cent respectively. The urban character of the former British administration was fairly responsible for creating a wide gap between urban and rural literacy. The ratio between urban and rural literates which was 2.86 : 1.00 in 1951 has got reduced to 1.35 : 1.00 in 2001. The contrasts have been sharper in urban-rural female literate ratio than urban rural male literate ratio from 1951 to 2001. Urban-rural female literate ratio has experienced continuous decline since 1951 and it has come down from 4.58 : 1.00 in 1951 to 1.57 : 1.00 in 2001. The urban-rural gap in literacy is attributed to appalling poverty in rural areas, even when education is free to all children up to 14 years in India.

State Wise Urban-Rural Disparities in Literacy Rates In India

The average literacy rate of our country was 65.20 per cent in 2001. The literacy rate among male and female was 76 and 54 per cent respectively. But in Table 3, there are many disparities among the states. On the one side the Kerala has the highest literacy rate of 90.92 per cent followed by Maharashtra (77.27%), Himachal Pradesh (75.915%), Tamil Nadu (73.47%),

16 D. PULLA RAO

TABLE 2: URBAN-RURAL LITERACY RATES AND RATIOS IN INDIA: 1951- 2001

Year	Males	Urban Rural Male Literate Ratio	Females	Urban Rural Female Literate Ratio	Persons	Urban Rural Literate Ratio
1951		2.40:1.00		4.58:1.00		2.86:1.00
Rural	19.02		4.87		12.10	
Urban	45.60		22.33		34.59	
Total	27.16		8.86		18.33	
1961		1.92:1.00		4.01:1.00		2.42:1.00
Rural	34.30		10.10		22.50	
Urban	66.00		40.50		54.40	
Total	40.40		15.35		28.30	
1971		1.44:1.00		3.15:1.00		2.16:1.00
Rural	48.60		15.50		27.90	
Urban	69.80		48.80		60.20	
Total	45.96		21.97		34.45	
1981		1.55:1.00		2.59:1.00		1.87:1.00
Rural	49.60		21.70		36.00	
Urban	76.70		56.30		67.20	
Total	56.38		29.76		43.57	
1991		1.40:1.00		2.09:1.00		1.64:1.00
Rural	57.90		30.60		44.70	
Urban	81.10		64.00		73.10	
Total	64.13		39.29		52.21	
2001		1.21:1.00		1.57:1.00		1.35:1.00
Rural	71.40		46.70		59.40	
Urban	86.70		73.20		80.30	
Total	75.85		54.16		65.38	

Punjab (69.75%), West Bengal (69.22%), Karnataka (67.04%), and Gujarat was (66.43%). Rest of the states have literacy levels below than the national average. The lowest literacy level is in Bihar (47.53 %) followed by Uttar Pradesh (57.36%), Rajasthan (61.03%), Andhra Pradesh (61.11 %), Madhya Pradesh (64.08%) and Assam (64.28%).

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 10 September 2009 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 30 September 2010 04:24

DISPARITIES IN LITERACY RATES IN INDIA 17

TABLE 3: STATE WISE URBAN - RURAL LITERACY RATE OF MALE AND FEMALE IN INDIA: 2001 CENSUS

Census-2001	Total	Male	Female	Rural	Urban
Andhra Pradesh	61	71	51	55	76
Assam	64	72	56	61	86
Bihar	48	60	34	44	73
Gujarat	70	81	59	59	79
Haryana	69	79	56	69	80
Himachal Pradesh	77	86	68	74	90
Karnataka	67	76	57	60	81
Kerala	91	94	88	90	93
Madhya Pradesh	64	77	50	58	80
Maharashtra	77	86	68	71	86
Orissa	64	76	51	60	81
Punjab	70	76	64	65	79
Rajasthan	61	76	44	56	77
Tamil Nadu	73	82	65	67	82
Uttar Pradesh	57	70	43	54	71
West Bengal	69	78	60	64	82
All India	65	76	54	59	80

Source: Census of India, 2001.

The national average of literacy in urban areas was 80.06 per cent in 2001, the highest rate being in Kerala (93.38%) followed by Himachal Pradesh (89.63%), Assam (85.95%). Remaining other states had literacy rate below the national average.

The national average of literacy in rural areas in 2001 was 59.21 per cent, the highest literacy being in Kerala (90.05%) followed by Himachal Pradesh (74.38 %), Maharashtra (70.84%), Haryana (68.82%), Tamil Nadu (66.66%), Punjab (65.16%), West Bengal (64.06%), Assam (60.92%) and Orissa (60.44%). The lowest literacy rate in rural India were in Bihar (44.42%), Uttar Pradesh (53.68%) Rajasthan (55.92%) Madhya Pradesh (58.10%) and Gujarat (58.53%).

18 D. PULLA RAO

Progress of Scheduled Caste (SC) And Scheduled Tribe (ST)Literacy In Urban And Rural India

Urban-rural disparity has been decreasing significantly among both the SCs and STs since 1961. The disparity has been decreasing among both males and females in both the social groups. Among scheduled tribe population the urban- rural differential in female population has decreased most impressively. The urban-rural disparity among scheduled tribe females has decreased from 4.64: 1.00 in 1961 to 1.84: 1.00 in 2001 (Table 4). The decrease of the disparity is a positive sign. This situation may be due to so many policies and programmes implemented by the Government of India after Independence to improve the literacy and enrollment of scheduled tribe

TABLE 4: LITERACY RATES OF SCHEDULED CASTE AND SCHEDULED TRIBE POPULATION BY SEX AND RESIDENCE IN INDIA: 1961 -2001

State / Union Territory	Schedule Caste Population			Urban rural SC literate	Schedule Tribe population			Urban rural ST literate
	Total	Rural	Urban		Total	Rural	Urban	
	Persons							
1961	10.27	8.89	21.81	2.45:1.00	8.53	8.16	22.41	2.75:1.00
1971	14.67	12.77	28.65	2.24:1.00	11.30	10.68	28.84	2.70:1.00
1981	21.38	18.48	36.60	1.98:1.00	16.35	14.92	37.93	2.54:1.00
1991	37.41	33.25	55.11	1.66:1.00	29.60	27.38	56.60	2.07:1.00
2001	54.69	51.16	68.12	1.33:1.00	47.10	45.02	69.09	1.53:1.00
Males								
1961	16.96	15.06	32.21	2.14:1.00	13.83	13.37	30.43	2.27:1.00
1971	22.36	20.04	38.93	1.94:1.00	17.63	16.92	37.09	2.19:1.00
1981	31.12	27.91	47.54	1.70:1.00	24.52	22.94	47.60	2.07:1.00
1991	49.91	45.95	66.06	1.45:1.00	40.65	38.45	66.56	1.73:1.00
2001	66.64	63.66	77.93	1.22:1.00	59.17	57.39	77.77	1.35:1.00
Females								
1961	3.29	2.52	10.04	3.98:1.00	3.16	2.90	13.45	4.64:1.00
1971	6.44	5.06	16.99	3.36:1.00	4.85	4.36	19.64	4.50:1.00
1981	10.93	8.45	24.34	2.88:1.00	8.04	6.81	27.32	4.01:1.00
1991	23.76	19.45	42.29	2.17:1.00	18.19	16.02	45.66	2.85:1.00
2001	41.90	37.84	57.49	1.52:1.00	34.76	32.44	59.87	1.84:1.00

Source: Censuses of India for various years.

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 10 September 2009 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 30 September 2010 04:24

DISPARITIES IN LITERACY RATES IN INDIA 19

population through concessions and reservations and awareness campaigns to improve the literacy of scheduled tribe population especially for the females. It is most encouraging to find that in more recent times, the females from the rural poor have been awakened through public awareness campaigns and the disparity has reduced significantly.

Though a number of strategies have been used in India to meet the educational needs of the tribal students, yet they are inadequate. Therefore, there is a need to take effective measures on the following lines:

1. Provision of more schooling facilities, particularly model schools.
2. Undertake teacher training and orientation about tribal needs and educational programmes.
3. Re-orienting curriculum, content and medium of instruction suited to the tribal children.
4. Provision of teaching / learning materials
5. Innovative methods to be developed for supervision of schools.
6. Micro planning and effective implementation.

State Wise Urban-Rural Disparities in Literacy Rates Among Social Groups In India

Table 5 presents distribution of persons aged seven years and above by major social groups. The pattern of variation in the literacy rate was almost the same in rural as well as urban areas. However, in rural India, the literacy rate was the lowest for persons belonging to STs (42%) followed by persons belonging to SCs (47%). But in urban India, the literacy rate was the lowest for SC groups (66%) followed by ST Groups (70%). In both the sectors the literacy rate was the highest for persons belonging to group 'others' (Upper Castes).

The urban-rural bias can be seen in the literacy as is reflected in Table 5. Urban literacy extended in urban areas over the rural India. The urban literacy stood at 70 per cent whereas it was just 42.2 per cent in rural area. The gap is explicit more in states like Tamil Nadu where in urban literacy stood at 95.7, which is far higher than just 50.8 per cent for rural Tamil Nadu.

State Wise Urban -Rural Disparities In Literacy Rates Among Religious Groups In India

The distribution of persons aged seven years and above by each sector

20 D. PULLA RAO

TABLE 5: PERCENTAGE OF LITERATE PERSONS AGED 7 YEARS AND ABOVE IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS BY SOCIAL GROUP BASED ON 55th ROUNDS

State	ST		SC		OBC		Others		All	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Andhra Pradesh	26.1	57.5	39.4	67.3	42.5	68.8	62.3	82.2	45.8	74.5
Assam	71.6	85.3	69.7	69.2	72.9	80.1	66.7	89.7	69.0	86.1
Bihar	34.4	69.7	25.7	47.5	42.4	63.6	59.2	84.0	41.8	69.6
Gujarat	50.3	66.8	55.5	71.2	55.8	76.7	75.0	91.2	62.0	84.1
Haryana	48.3	93.7	50.7	53.4	58.1	75.5	67.7	84.6	61.2	76.6
Himachal Pradesh	73.1	85.4	67.7	81.2	81.1	78.9	74.2	93.3	73.4	90.2
Karnataka	41.3	53.9	44.3	65.6	56.6	79.6	65.2	88.9	55.9	82.1
Kerala	80.2	97.5	79.1	87.9	88.3	92.3	94.1	96.4	89.4	93.7
Madhya Pradesh	32.4	59.8	46.0	64.0	55.6	73.5	67.8	87.9	49.8	77.5
Maharashtra	49.9	79.4	63.5	80.1	69.0	83.0	72.2	88.3	66.5	86.0
Orissa	33.1	55.2	47.8	53.2	61.6	79.4	73.9	85.8	53.8	75.5
Punjab	69.2	75.5	51.9	60.1	63.5	80.3	70.4	87.2	62.5	78.9
Rajasthan	38.4	69.1	36.7	56.0	46.3	70.0	57.8	84.4	46.5	75.1
Tamil Nadu	50.8	95.7	55.9	74.1	66.3	84.0	81.7	92.9	63.8	84.5
Uttar Pradesh	47.7	78.5	40.7	58.1	47.6	59.3	64.9	79.7	51.1	70.1
West Bengal	41.6	63.2	57.1	67.4	74.6	81.2	64.7	86.2	61.7	82.2
All India	42.2	70.0	46.6	66.2	54.8	75.3	67.7	86.5	56.0	79.8

Source: NSSO Report No. 473: Literacy and Levels of Education in India 1999-2000.

and religions are shown in Table 6. It is noticed that the literacy rate was lower in rural India for 'Islam' compared to other religions. Literacy rate for all the religious groups, as revealed again for the first time in 2001 Census, were very encouraging, shattering many myths earlier when such a data set was not available for the country as a whole. The literacy among Hindus (65.1%) was slightly better than the national average (64.8%) for all religious groups combined. Among Muslims the literacy rate is 59.1 per cent, below the national average. The highest literacy rate is recorded among the Jains (94.1%), followed by Christians (80.3%), Buddhists (72.7%) and Sikhs (69.4%). Against the existing popular perception, the female literacy rate among

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 10 September 2009 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 30 September 2010 04:24

DISPARITIES IN LITERACY RATES IN INDIA 21

TABLE 6: PERCENTAGE OF LITERATE PERSONS AGED 7 YEARS AND ABOVE IN RELIGIOUS GROUPS BASED ON 55th ROUND

State	Hinduism		Islam		Christianity		Others		All	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Andhra Pradesh	45.4	75.0	51.0	70.7	51.5	78.9	55.5	96.1	45.8	74.5
Assam	74.5	87.0	59.4	79.7	53.5	80.5	85.7	-	69.0	86.1
Bihar	42.6	70.7	36.1	61.1	44.7	83.5	41.3	96.0	41.8	69.6
Gujarat	61.8	83.7	69.1	82.7	62.5	94.2	-	-	62.0	84.1
Haryana	61.7	76.9	31.0	54.5	-	-	-	-	61.2	76.6
Himachal Pradesh	73.7	90.2	56.9	73.6	-	-	83.2	-	73.4	90.2
Karnataka	55.3	82.9	63.2	77.1	68.0	95.5	52.0	73.4	55.9	82.1
Kerala	88.4	94.2	87.2	91.0	95.1	95.8	-	-	89.4	93.7
Madhya Pradesh	49.1	77.5	60.3	73.6	66.5	89.1	-	61.3	49.8	77.5
Maharashtra	66.2	87.3	67.1	79.9	61.4	95.3	76.4	86.6	66.5	86.0
Orissa	53.7	76.6	67.1	56.7	48.5	63.7	62.6	-	53.8	75.5
Punjab	68.4	79.2	62.9	65.4	44.2	77.7	84.7	-	62.5	78.9
Rajasthan	46.7	76.0	38.4	64.9	-	100.00	47.8	92.6	46.5	75.1
Tamil Nadu	61.7	84.3	84.1	81.6	83.6	91.2	-	90.6	63.8	84.5
Uttar Pradesh	52.9	76.8	38.9	52.6	66.4	100.00	37.6	59.7	51.1	70.1
West Bengal	65.5	84.3	53.7	66.6	79.6	91.8	57.7	87.3	61.7	82.2
All India	55.7	81.1	52.1	69.8	73.7	91.1	54.2	87.1	56.0	79.8

SOURCE: NSSO Report No. 473: Literacy and Levels of Education in India 1999-2000.

different religious groups does not show wide variations. Among the Muslims, for instance, the literacy rate among the females was stagnant 50.1 per cent, below the national average of 53.7 per cent. Slightly better is the females' literacy rate among the Hindus (53.2%), again below the national average. The highest literacy rate among the females was recorded among the Jains (90.6%), like their male counterparts. Female literacy rate among Christians was 76.2 per cent, followed by Sikhs (63.1%) (Census, 2001).

The 55th round NSSO report reveals the difference in literacy in different religious communities. The literacy rate in Christians is the highest both in rural as well as urban areas. Hindus stand at the second place whereas Muslims

22 D. PULLA RAO

occupy the third place with 52 and 70 per cent literacy respectively in rural as well as urban areas (Table-6).

CONCLUSION

In India more than 70 per cent of the population is living in rural areas. The number of rural illiterates is more than the urban illiterates. There is no doubt that in India, there is a phenomenal development in education after Independence. The population of literates in India increased from 12.6 millions in 1901 to 566.71 millions in 2001. The rural literacy in India increased from 12.10 per cent in 1951 to 59.40 per cent in 2001. The ratio between urban and rural literates which was 2.86 : 1.00 in 1951 has reduced to 1.35 : 1.00 in 2001. Kerala has the highest overall literacy rate of 90.92 per cent whereas the lowest literacy level is in Bihar (47.53%) as per 2001 census. The disparity of literacy rate has been decreasing in both males and females in both SCs and STs. In both urban and rural areas, the literacy rate was the highest for persons belonging to the 'Others' group (i.e. Other than SC, ST, and OBC). The literacy rate was lower in rural India for 'Islam' compared to other religions. The literacy rate in Christians is the highest in rural as well as urban areas.

We conclude that urban-rural literate ratio still calls for more vigorous efforts especially among the rural female population. Much still remains to be done. Rural women need to wake up and actively participate in the movement for universalisation of literacy. Special effort needs to be paid to promote rural literacy among various groups comprising SCs and STs especially among the female components of these groups.

REFERENCES

- Krishna G. and Shyam, M. (1978): "Regional Aspects of urban and Rural Differential in India, 1971", *The Journal of Development Areas*, Vol. 13, No.1, pp.11-21.
- Krishna, G. and Shyam, M. (1973): "Spatial Perspective on Progress of Female Literacy in India: 1901-71: *Pacific viewpoint*, Vol.13, pp.22-36.
- Mehta Arun C. (2006): *Elementary Education in India, Analytical Report 2004-2005*, Published by National Institute of Education Planning and Administration and Ministry of Human Resource Development, GOI.
- Singh, Nina. (1998): "Female Literacy in India: The Emerging Trends," *Population Geography*, vol.20, Nos.1&2, June-Dec.1998, pp23-26.
- UNESCO. (1990): *Final Report of World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs*, 5-9 March, 1990, Thailand.
- United Nations. (2005): *Economics and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2005*, Economics and Social Commission for Asia and The Pacific, New York, 2005, pp.220.
- United Nations Development Programme (2003) *Human Development report*, 2003, Oxford University Press, New York
- United Nations Development Programme. (2004): *World Development Report*, 2004, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- UNDP. (2004): "Human development Report 2004", Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse world, New York: Oxford University Press.