

Adult literacy rates of Males and Females in India: A comparative study

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Abstract

The researcher in this researcher paper compares the situation of literacy rates among adults before and after independent India. The research paper concludes that the literacy rates in various censuses from 1901 onward show an increase trend in both males and females. The rates were very low till 1931 but there was a sudden jump in 1941 from 9.25 percent to 16.1 percent, however, it remained almost stationary at 16.45 percent in 1951. This may be due to the fact that earlier figures were for undivided India and secondly, after the partition of the country into India and Pakistan in 1947, almost eight million people came to the Indian Union from newly created Pakistan and around six to seven million Muslims went from India. Thus, it is almost impossible to assign reasons for the observed figures. There has been a monotonous increase of 5 to 8 percent in the literacy rates after 1951, it becoming 13.69 percent in the 1991-2001 decade and 7.76 percent in 2001-2011 decade. The literacy rate has become more than three times during the past half-a-century and there is growth in population per census from 1901-2011.

Keywords: literacy, functional literacy, adult education, mass literacy campaign

Introduction

Literacy is a power that can create abilities in human beings, promote healthy environment, act as a learning tool and create passion for enlarging learning potential. It is vital for all human endeavors in the emerging world power. Literacy is not isolated bits of knowledge but is a growing ability to use language and literacy in all spheres' of life. There are sufficient national evidences to recognize that literacy is crucial to the acquisition of essential life skills that enable people to address the challenges they face in life. These life skills encompass analytical skills, social and personal skills, negotiation and livelihood skills that are indispensable for effective participation in the societies and economics of the 21st century.

Definition of Literacy

In the modern world, the term literacy is used in a very wide and comprehensive sense. The National Literacy Mission (NLM), 1988 ^[10] defines 'literacy' as acquiring the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic and the ability to apply them to one's day-to-day life. The first and easiest meaning of 'literacy' implies only the ability to read and write. The second definitely implies this aptitude, but also requires something beyond it. It recommends that the concept of literacy goes beyond merely being able to read, it has always intended the ability to read with meaning and to understand. It is the basic act of cognition. Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), 2008 offers a definition of literacy and implies effectively that, "literacy is language written and oral, people use in their everyday life and work; it includes reading, writing, speaking and listening". Further literacy is redefined as, "The written and oral language, people use in everyday life and work". A person's literacy refers to the extent of their oral and written language skills and knowledge and their ability to apply these to meet the varied demands of their personal study and work lives (<http://www.tec.govt.nz/...../Literacy-Language-and-Numeracy-Action-Plan-200.....on> dated 16/04/2009).

The Concept of Functional Literacy

The concept of functional literacy can be described as 'rather than an end in itself, functional literacy should be regarded as a way of preparing man for a social, civic and economic role that goes beyond the limits of rudimentary literacy training consisting merely in the teaching of reading and writing.

Kothari Commission (1964-66), while explaining the word 'Functional Literacy' stated: "We do not equate literacy with mere ability to read and write. Literacy if it is to be worthwhile must be functional. It should enable the literate person not only to acquire sufficient mastery over the tools of literacy, but also to acquire relevant knowledge which will enable him to pursue his own interests and ends" (Bhargava, 2008, pp. 4) ^[1].

The United Nation for Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2006 has differentiated between 'literate' and 'functional literate'. A 'literate' is one who can read and write a short simple statement in his everyday life. A 'functional literate' is defined as 'one who has acquired all the essential knowledge functioning in his group and community, and whose attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his/her own and his/her community's development' (Bhuraita, 2009, pp. 5-6) ^[3].

Adult Education to Mass Literacy Campaign

India is the second largest demographic country of the world and democracy without literacy is meaningless. It is in general, a mean of enlarging and enlightening the mind which enable the individual to achieve a status so that he/she may become meaningful functional member of the democratic society. There is formal education system namely nursery, kinder garden, primary, secondary and post-secondary education. Education refers to all kinds of learning that take place, whether formal or non-formal (and same would include informal as well), non-formal stream which includes adult education/ literacy also.

“Adult education is a process whereby persons who no longer attend school on a regular and fulltime basis (unless full time programmes are especially designed for adults) undertakes sequential and organized activities with the conscious intention of bring about changes in information, knowledge, undertaking skills, appreciation and attitudes of the purpose of identify and solving personal or community problems” (Mali, 1984, pp. 17)^[7]. The ‘mass literacy’ is central to ‘education for all’. It has been demonstrated worldwide, that massive changes in social order facilitate through mass literacy efforts. Mass literacy inevitably takes on the challenge of political, social and economic marginalization of people by empowering the process of rapid change. It is essential to create literate environment in society for ensuring universalization of elementary and adult education, so essential for achieving generic quality, ensuring sustainable development, taking care of other social and moral issues, problems such as child mortality etc., through a campaign. The term campaign includes a series of operations which are organized and indented to achieve a particular goal, series and area of involving a specified type (Bhuraita, 2009, pp. 8-11)^[3].

Mass Literacy Campaign in the Pre-Independence Era

The successful operation of the MLC for adults during the period of 1938-47 has awakened the masses; several campaigns for Basic Literacy Programmes (BLPs) were carried out during 1938-39 at the provincial level (Bengal, United Provinces, Bombay, Madras, Punjab and Assam). The launching of literacy campaigns in all over India and the active association of eminent Indians namely Mahatama Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru created a conclusive atmosphere for the development of mass literacy movement in India and also led to the formation of professional societies. In addition, some of the mass educators felt a need for setting up a control organization. The Indian Education Society (IES) was founded in Delhi in 1937 and the first All India Adult Education Conference (AIAEC) was organized in March, 1938 to explore the possibilities of bringing into being a central organization to yield results in December, 1939. The reports of second, third, fourth and fifth conferences of the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) stressed the importance of adult literacy, need for training of literacy teachers, motivation of adults, use of audio-visual media in teaching and efforts for checking the relapse of illiteracy. As a whole the mass education became an official programme by 1940s. In addition, some of the mass educators felt a need for setting up a control organization. The Indian Education Society (IES) was founded in Delhi in 1937 and the first All India Adult Education Conference (AIAEC) was organized in March, 1938 to explore the possibilities of bringing into being a central organization to yield results in December, 1939. The mass education became an official programme by 1940s (Negi, 1995)^[11].

The population growth was 238.4 million in 1901 which increased to 252.09 million in 1911, 251.32 million in 1921, 272.98 million in 1931 and 318.66 million in 1941. Though, the literacy rate too showed a phenomenal increase for the censuses 1901 to 1941 from 5.2 percent to 16.1 percent for total population, 9.8 percent to 24.9 percent for male population and 0.6 percent to 7.3 percent for female population (Sharma, 2004)^[13].

Mass Literacy Campaign in the Post-Independence Era

The post independent era up to the 10th Five Year Plan covered the problems of illiteracy in India in which various mass education programmes were incorporated and carried out by the NLM, 1988^[10]. Planners in the sixties and seventies saw literacy as an essential input in national development and it was the time when the concept of functional literacy was being promoted by UNESCO. The programmes like Farmers’ Functional Literacy Programme (FFLP) and Shramik Vidyapeeth Programme (SVP)/ Workers’ Education Programme (WEP) in the sixties and seventies were designed to facilitate the process of modernization by acquiring the skills to increase productivity as well as transmitting and promoting the newly articulated national ideals of hard work, scientific temperament, rationale and a sense of identification with the composite culture. The late sixties and seventies saw some radical shift in the discourse on literacy. The directive principles of state policy of the Indian constitution entitled ‘the state to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of fourteen and had set to achieve this target by 1961 i.e., within 10 years from the commencement of the constitution in 1951. However, in the matter of literacy and education of adults, there was neither any specific nor a definite timeline.

After extensive consultation and a policy statement on adult education, an outline of National Adult Education programme (NAEP) was formulated on October 2, 1978. It was launched for Fifth Five Year Plan (1978-83) to organize adult education with literacy as indispensable component for at least 100 million illiterates (mainly in the age group of 15-35 years). By the end of 1983, the performance of NAEP in terms of improvement in literacy status could not keep pace with the tremendous growth in population and pushing the country further behind in its attempts to reach universal literacy. The population growth was 361.09 million in 1951 which increased to 439.23 million in 1961, 548.16 million in 1971 and 683.33 million in 1981. Though, the literacy rate too showed a phenomenal increase from 16.45 percent to 35.35 percent for total population, 25 percent to 45.9 percent for male population and 7.9 percent to 24.8 percent for female population.

In the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85), the emphasis on minimum essential education for all citizens was laid once again. The Post Literacy Programme (PLP) and the Continuing Education Programme (CEP) were taken up of essential part of Adult Education Programmes (AEPs)/ Adult Literacy Programmes (ALPs) along with priority to National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986, stated, “The whole nation must pledge itself to eradication of illiteracy” (Suman, 1998, pp. 34-39)^[14]. The Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90), in the continuity of the previous programme NPE, 1986 gave special focus on adult education through the task group of Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) because of its vital linkage with national development (Suman, 1998, pp. 34-39)^[14].

Thus, the past trends in literacy rates before and after independence shows that prior to the 1991 census, the Indian literacy census was excluding the children aged from 0-4 years in the counting of literate population. On the eve of the 1991 census, it was decided that all children in the 0-6 age group will be treated as illiterate and literacy rates would be computed for population aged 7 years and above. Table no. 1 shows growth in literacy rates by Sex and population (in millions) for the census years from 1901-2011 in India.

Table 1: Literacy Rates by Sex with Population Growth in India for the Census Years from 1901-2011

Census Year	Literacy Rates in Percentage (Approximately)			Population Growth (In Million)
	Persons	Males	Females	
1901	5.20	9.80	0.60	238.4
1911	5.80	10.60	1.00	252.09
1921	7.00	12.20	1.80	251.32
1931	9.25	15.60	2.90	272.98
1941	16.10	24.90	7.30	318.66
1951	16.45	25.00	7.90	361.09
1961	23.7	34.40	13.00	439.23
1971	29.05	39.40	18.70	548.16
1981	35.35	45.90	24.80	683.33
1991	52.45	62.70	42.20	846.42
2001	66.14	69.40	62.88	1028.74
2011	74.90	82.34	67.46	1210.19

Source: 1. Figures for literacy rates for the census years from 1901 to 2001 are retrieved from <http://www.educationforallindia.com/page172.htm> on dated 31/01/2012.

2. Figure for literacy rate for the census year for 2011 is retrieved from http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literacy_in_India on dated 23/01/2012.

3. Figures for population growth in India for the census years from 1901-1951 are retrieved from http://www.iipsenvis.nic.in/Newsletters/vol8no1/Report_1 on dated 12/03/2012.

Note

1. Figures from 1901 to 1941 are for undivided India.
2. Figures for 1981 exclude Assam and for 1991 exclude Jammu and Kashmir are showing that there was no census conducted in Assam in 1981 and in Jammu and Kashmir in 1991.
3. Figures for 2001 are excluding the entire Kachchh district; Morvi, Maliya-Miyana and Wankaner talukas of Rajkot district; Jodiya taluka of Jamnagar district of Gujarat state and entire Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh, where 2001 census enumeration were not held due to natural calamities.
4. Literacy rates for 1951, 1961 and 1971 related to population aged five years and above. The literacy rates for the years 1981 to 2011 related to the population aged seven years and above.

The literacy rates in various censuses from 1901 onward show an increase trend in both males and females. The rates were very low till 1931 but there was a sudden jump in 1941 from 9.25 percent to 16.1 percent, however, it remained almost stationary at 16.45 percent in 1951. This may be due to the fact that earlier figures were for undivided India and secondly, after the partition of the country into India and Pakistan in 1947, almost eight million people came to the Indian Union from newly created Pakistan and around six to seven million Muslims went from India. Thus, it is almost impossible to assign reasons for the observed figures. There has been a monotonous increase of 5 to 8 percent in the literacy rates after 1951, it becoming 13.69 percent in the 1991-2001 decade and 7.76 percent in 2001-2011 decade. The literacy rate has become more than three times during the past half-a-century and there is growth in population per census from 1901-2011.

Conclusion

The two basic problems faced by Indian society are poverty and illiteracy. Thus, still in the 21st century we are not in the position to compete the developed countries. In order to make everyone functional literate and reduce the gender literacy gap in India there is still a need to (i) Choose a substantial part of the literate and better skilled persons (ii) Involving people in various developmental programmes which would make it

possible to achieve optimum potential and minimize wastes, (iii) Create awareness among them regarding laws, policies and schemes of the government and better health and nutrition. This in turn would help to implement the strategy of redistributive justice, (iv) Teach adults between the ages of 15-35 years and above by 3R's (reading, writing and arithmetic), (v) Teach adults for functional competences and to achieve an occupation and (vi) Make them aware of history culture and developmental schemes for social awareness in India. However, the performance of various literacy campaigns in terms of improvement in literacy status could not keep pace with the tremendous growth in population and pushing the country further behind in its attempts to reach universal literacy.

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