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"ADULT EDUCATION IN INDIA: PROGRAMMES, PROGRESS, AND CONTINUING EDUCATION PERSPECTIVES"

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ABSTRACT:

Adult Education aims at extending educational opportunities to adults who have lost the opportunity of formal education or who now require further learning. Its scope includes literacy, basic education, skill development, vocational education and equivalency. With the objective of promoting adult education, a series of programmes have been introduced since the First Five Year Plan. Among these, the National Literacy Mission (NLM), launched in 1988, gave particular attention to functional literacy among non-literate persons in the age group of 15–35 years. By the end of the 10th Plan period, NLM had made 127.45 million persons literate, of whom 60% were females, 23% belonged to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and 12% to Scheduled Tribes (STs). As reported in the programme figures, 597 districts were covered under Total Literacy Campaigns, of which 502 reached the Post-Literacy stage and 328 reached the Continuing Education stage.

The Census 2001 figures showed that gender and regional disparities in literacy continued to persist. Male literacy was 75.26%, while female literacy was 53.67%. To strengthen Adult Education and Skill Development, the Government of India introduced Saakshar Bharat and the Scheme for Support to Voluntary Agencies for Adult Education and Skill Development during the 11th Plan. Saakshar Bharat, as a further development of the earlier NLM, set goals of raising the literacy rate to 80%, reducing the gender gap to 10% and minimizing regional and social disparities, with focus on women, SCs, STs, minorities and other disadvantaged groups.

The present discussion retains the main statistical information of the original paper and places it in the wider context of continuing education. Literacy is more useful when adults have opportunities to practise what they have learned and to connect it with everyday needs, employment, family responsibilities and social participation.

KEYWORDS:

ADULT EDUCATION, ADULT LITERACY, EDUCATION POLICY, FUNCTIONAL LITERACY, LIFELONG LEARNING.

INTRODUCTION

LITERACY SCENARIO OF INDIA: CENSUS 2011

Census 2011 revealed that literacy in India had made considerable progress. The literacy rate stood at 72.98%. Overall literacy increased by 8.14 percentage points during the decade, from 64.84% in 2001 to 72.98% in 2011. Male literacy increased by 5.62 percentage points, from 75.26% in 2001 to 80.88% in 2011, whereas female literacy increased by 10.96 percentage points, from 53.67% to 64.63%. The number of illiterate persons in the 7+ age group decreased from 304.10 million in 2001 to 282.70 million in 2011.

The increase in literacy is significant, but the figures also show that progress was not uniform. Differences between rural and urban areas and between different social groups remained visible. This suggests that the expansion of literacy needs to be accompanied by policies that address access, continuity and the specific circumstances of disadvantaged learners.

STATES REPORTED WITH LITERACY RATE GREATER THAN 90%

Kerala (94%), Lakshadweep (91.85%) and Mizoram (91.33%).

STATES WITH LITERACY RATE BETWEEN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE (72.98%) AND BELOW 90%

Tripura (87.22%), Goa (88.70%), Daman & Diu (87.10%), Puducherry (85.85%), Chandigarh (86.05%), Delhi (86.21%), A&N Islands (86.63%), Himachal Pradesh (82.80%), Maharashtra (82.34%), Sikkim (81.42%), Tamil Nadu (80.09%), Nagaland (79.55%), Manipur (76.94%), Uttarakhand (78.82%), Gujarat (78.03%), Dadra & Nagar Haveli (76.24%), West Bengal (76.26%), Punjab (75.84%), Haryana (75.55%), Karnataka (75.36%) and Meghalaya (74.43%).

Literacy in rural areas stood at 67.77%, with rural male literacy at 77.15% and rural female literacy at 57.93%. In comparison, literacy in urban areas stood at 84.11%, with urban male literacy at 88.76% and urban female literacy at 79.11%. The difference indicates the continuing importance of educational facilities and learning opportunities in rural communities.

The literacy rate among SCs stood at 66.07% (male SCs 75.17% and female SCs 56.46%), whereas the literacy rate among STs stood at 58.95% (male STs 68.51% and female STs 49.36%). These figures indicate that social disadvantage and gender can overlap and affect

educational opportunity.

Gender disparity in literacy declined by 5.34 percentage points, from 21.59 percentage points in 2001 to 16.25 percentage points during the 2001–2011 period. There had been a continuous decrease in the gender gap since 1991, when it was 24.84 percentage points. The decline is encouraging, but the remaining difference shows that equal educational opportunity continues to require attention.

ADULT EDUCATION AND CONTINUING LEARNING

Adult education cannot be treated only as a campaign to reduce the number of non-literate adults. Once basic literacy is acquired, learners need opportunities to use reading, writing and numeracy in practical situations. Post-literacy and continuing education can help adults maintain these abilities and gradually add new knowledge and skills.

Adult learners also face practical constraints that are different from those of school-going children. Employment, household duties, distance from learning centres and limited time can affect regular participation. For this reason, flexible timings, locally relevant examples and learning activities connected with everyday life can make adult education more useful. Literacy becomes more meaningful when it helps adults understand information, use public services, support their children's education or improve their livelihood prospects.

ADULT EDUCATION AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

The social value of adult education extends beyond individual literacy. A person who can read documents, understand instructions and communicate in written or digital forms is generally better placed to interact with institutions and services. For women and disadvantaged social groups, such learning opportunities may also strengthen confidence and participation in community life.

At the same time, adult education should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. The Census figures show considerable variation between regions and social groups. Programmes therefore need to consider local language, work patterns, community conditions and the particular barriers faced by women, rural learners and socially disadvantaged groups.

NEP 2020 AND THE CHANGING POLICY PERSPECTIVE

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places adult education within a broader understanding of lifelong learning. It identifies foundational literacy and numeracy, critical life skills, vocational skills development, basic education and continuing education as important areas. This approach recognizes that adults require learning opportunities that remain useful as social, economic and technological conditions change.

Technology has added another dimension to adult education. Digital services are increasingly used for communication, banking, information and access to public services. Basic digital awareness can therefore support the practical use of literacy. At the same time, unequal access to devices, internet connectivity and digital skills can create another form of educational inequality. Adult education programmes need to combine technology with accessible community-level support.

ULLAS–Nav Bharat Saaksharta Karyakram represents the current direction of adult literacy and continuing education under the broader policy framework. Its emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy, life skills, vocational learning and continuing education reflects the shift from a narrow literacy approach towards lifelong learning.

MAJOR CHALLENGES

Despite progress, adult education continues to face several challenges. Gender, rural–urban and social disparities remain important. Working adults may find it difficult to attend learning programmes regularly because of employment and family responsibilities. Another challenge is the continuation of learning after initial literacy. Without opportunities for practice and further learning, the practical gains of literacy may remain limited.

The quality of learning materials, availability of trained instructors, local participation and access to technology also influence outcomes. Future programmes should therefore be flexible, locally relevant and connected with practical needs. Special attention is required for women, rural communities and disadvantaged social groups.

CONCLUSION:

India has made substantial progress in adult literacy through programmes such as the National Literacy Mission and Saakshar Bharat. Census 2011 recorded a clear rise in the literacy rate and a reduction in the gender gap. The expansion of literacy opportunities among women and disadvantaged groups is an important part of this progress. At the same time, the remaining rural, gender and social differences show that equitable access to learning is still an unfinished task.

Adult education should therefore be understood as a continuing process that connects literacy with life skills, vocational learning, equivalency and further education. The broader direction of NEP 2020 and ULLAS is consistent with this approach. If programmes remain flexible, accessible and locally relevant, adult education can contribute not only to literacy but also to greater self-reliance, participation and social development.

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