



# Literacy Rate and Educational Level in India: A Comparison Based on NSSO Estimates

**Dr. Satvinderpal Kaur**

Senior Assistant Professor, SDS College of Education Lopon, Distt. Moga (Punjab)

**ABSTRACT**

Literacy is the key for socio-economic progress. Although literacy rates are improved after the independence, the level is still below the world average literacy rate of 84% and of all nations. India currently has the largest illiterate population. Despite governments' initiatives, India's literacy rate increased only sluggishly and recent research literature suggests that it would take until 2060 for India to achieve universal literacy at then-current rate of progress. The current survey of 66th round of NSS estimates indicate that in 2009-10, less than two-thirds (66.8%) of the population of all ages were literate. The overall disparity in literacy across the population is heightened by the presence of both rural-urban and male-female disparity. However, the survey results over the years also reveal the diminishing of disparities across the segments but there has been quantum leap in the female literacy rates over the last two decades. As compared to the 52nd round, a shift has been seen in the distribution towards higher levels of educational attainment for the entire population. This paper analytically discusses the literacy rates and educational level of different social groups based upon various rounds of NSSO estimates. This paper has been divided into three sections. In the first section literacy rate among different NSS rounds was discussed. In the second section education levels were presented. Third section deals with conclusion and policy implications.

**KEYWORDS**

literacy, population, estimates

**Section-I**

**INTRODUCTION**

Literacy is a human right, a tool of personal empowerment and a means for social and human development. Educational opportunities depend on literacy. It is at the heart of basic education for all, and essential for eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy (UNESCO 2010). The challenge of development work in the social sector in India today is one of bridging huge disparities across regions of the country, gender and social groups. Unless national and state policies specifically target resources to address these disparities, achieving higher level outcomes in an inclusive manner, which is the real goal for human development in education and health, will be a distant dream. Socio-economic and socio-political development of nation depends upon the literacy rate and educational level of residents of the nation. In this high tech era only educated people can contribute in development of nation. This issue prompts us to analyse the literacy rates and educational level of the nation based upon NSSO estimates.

**Literacy rate among different groups based on NSS Estimates**

In NSS surveys, a person who can read and write a simple message in any language with understanding is considered literate. The proportions of literates among various age-groups of the population, with rural-urban and male-female classification, serve as key indicators of the socio-economic progress of the country. The overall disparity in literacy across the population is heightened by the presence of both rural-urban and male-female disparity. However, the survey results over the years also reveal the diminishing of disparities across the segments. The literacy rate (i.e. percentage of literates) for all ages among rural female (RF), rural male (RM), urban female (UF) and urban male (UM) populations was found to be 51.1%, 68.4%, 71.6% and 82.2% respectively. Thus there has been quantum leap in the female literacy rates over the last two decades, with the rural female rate having more than doubled, although nearly half the female population of rural India still remains illiterate.

The literacy rates among the population of age 5 & above, 7 & above or 15 & above are arguably, more meaningful indi-

cators than literacy of persons of all ages. The 7-plus literacy rate facilitates comparison with estimates from the Population Census and also with past NSS rounds. In this round, rates for the 5-plus population were separately generated. The rates for these two age brackets (5-plus and 7-plus) were estimated to be more or less the same in the current round not only at all-India level but also at sub-category level, i.e. rural female, rural male, urban female and urban male. In fact, for rural females, the literacy rate for age 5 plus exceeded that for age 7 plus, indicating that the proportion of literates among rural females in the age-group 5 to 6 exceeded the proportion for the age-group 7 & above. For age 7 & above, the literacy rate in rural India was 67% (56.7% for females and 77% for males) while in urban India it was 84.3% (78.1% for females and 89.9% for males). Some improvement in literacy appears to have taken place in recent years, especially in the rural sector, where the 7-plus literacy rate for males has increased by over 4 percentage points and the rate for females by about 6 percentage points since 2004-2005.

**Table -1 Literacy Rate (%) in India for Persons in Different Age-groups during different Rounds of NSSO**

Age Group	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Age 15 and above	47.5	71.8	59.6	74.6	88.7	82.0	54.9	76.7	66.0
Age 7 and above	56.7	77.0	67.0	78.1	89.9	84.3	62.3	80.5	71.7
Age 5 and above	57.3	76.8	67.3	78.1	89.7	84.2	62.7	80.3	71.8
Age 15 & above: NSS 52nd Rd. (1995-96)	31.7	60.6	46.4	67.3	85.7	77.0	40.7	67.3	54.3

Age 7 & above: NSS 61st Rd. (2004-05)*	50.6	72.7	61.9	75.9	88.7	82.8	57.0	77.0	67.3
Persons of all ages NSS 66th Rd. (2009-10-05)*	53.3	70.6	62.2	73.6	83.6	78.9	58.8	74.2	66.8

**Ref: Table 5 in Appendix-A \* quinquennial round of EUS**  
Chapter III: Level of Education, Current Attendance & Enrolment Status 14NSS Report No. 532: Education in India, 2007-08: Participation and Expenditure

There are regional variations in literacy rates, which lie in the range of fifty eight percent to ninety four percent. Bihar is at the bottom and Kerala is at the top as per as literacy rate is concerned. Among the major states, the literacy rate for population aged 7 & above varied from 58.1%in Bihar to 93.9% in Kerala. Other low-literacy states included Rajasthan(61.7%), Andhra Pradesh (63.5%), Jharkhand (64.6%), Uttar Pradesh (66.2%), J&K (67.7%) andOrissa (68.3%), while Assam (83.8%) and the other North-Eastern States, Maharashtra (80.9%), Himachal Pradesh (80.4%) and Tamil Nadu (80%) are among the more literate ones. Sixty six percent of the country'sadult population (population of age 15 & above) wasfound to be literate. Among rural females, rural males, urban females and urban males, the adultliteracy rates were 47.5%, 71.8%, 74.6% and 88.7% respectively. As per NSSO's latest round females both in the rural and urban settings keep literacy rate 53.3 and 73.6respectively in comparison to male counterparts of both rural and urban(73.6 and 83.6 respectively) Comparison with past NSSrounds indicates that both the rural-urban and the male-female disparities have reduced over time but nevertheless remain significant.

**SECTION-II**

**Distribution of population by Educational level**

Distribution of population by educational level is a dynamic phenomenon, the study ofwhich refines the measurement of social development. In NSS surveys the highest completedlevel of education is reported for each member of the surveyed household after taking intoconsideration the education attained by her/ him in general, technical, and vocational streams. The levels of education include non-formal education, below primary, primary, middle/ upper primary, secondary, higher secondary (HS), diploma/ certificate courses, graduate level degree courses, post-graduate and above level degree courses, etc.

The distribution of population of age 15 and above across levels of education in the current survey indicates (Statement 3.2) that the literates (66%) included 1% who had no formal education (this figure for rural and urban areas are .9 and 1.1 respectively) and 7.8% (this figure for rural and urban areas are 7.3 and 8.3 respectively) who had not completed primary level. The highest level of education successfully completed was primary for 15.3%, middle level for 16.5%, secondary for 11.9%,higher secondary (HS) for 6.5%, diploma for 0.9%, graduation for 4.8% and post-graduation and above for the remaining 1.4% of the adult (15+) population. The proportion of persons havingcompleted graduate (or above) level was only 1.6% among rural females, 3.8% among rural males, 12.3% among urban females and 17.2% among urban males. In rural as well as urban areas on an average male are for ahead females. This clearly reflects the feudal mind set of the country, where women folk are supposed to be confined in four walls of home. It is scenario of all third world countries but in India situation is very pathetic and dismal. Further , story does not end here, when rural areas are compared to urban areas, figures are very alarming and are to urban bi-

ased. To live in rural areas means to be lagging not only in education but also in other fields. The distribution of the entire adult (age 15 & above) population of the country by completed level of education can be seen at a glance from Table 2. As compared to the 52nd and earlier rounds, there has been a shift in the distribution towards higher levels of educational attainment for the entire population.

**TABLE 2 Percentage Distribution of Persons of Age 15 Years &Above by Completed Level of Education**

Level of education	Rural			Urban			Rural +Urban		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not literate	52.5	28.2	40.3	25.4	11.3	18.0	45.1	23.3	34.0
Literate: Without formal education	.8	1.1	1.0	.9	.9	.9	.9	1.1	1.0
Below primary	7.8	9.4	8.6	5.9	5.5	5.7	7.3	8.3	7.8
Primary	14.4	17.7	16.0	13.2	13.3	13.2	14.0	16.4	15.3
Middle	12.3	19.9	16.2	15.9	18.8	17.4	13.3	19.6	16.5
Secondary	7.2	12.6	9.9	15.6	18.4	17.0	9.5	14.3	11.9
Higher Secondary	3.1	6.4	4.7	10.0	12.1	11.1	5.0	8.0	6.5
Diploma	0.3	0.8	0.6	0.8	2.4	1.7	0.5	1.3	0.9
Graduation	1.3	3.0	2.2	9.3	13.3	11.4	3.5	6.0	4.8
Post-graduation &Above	1.3	3.0	2.2	9.3	13.3	11.4	3.5	6.0	4.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

**Ref: Table 5 in Appendix-A**  
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**SECTION - III**

**Conclusion and Policy Implications**

The current survey of 66<sup>th</sup> round of NSS estimatesindicate that in 2007-08, less than two-thirds (66.8 percent) of the population of all ages is literate. The overall disparity in literacy across the population is heightened by the presence of both rural urban and male-female disparity. However, the survey results over the years also reveal the diminishing of disparities across the segments. Thus there has been quantum leap in the female literacy rates over the last two decades. As compared to the 52nd round, there has been a shift in the distribution towards higher levels of educational attainment for the entire population. Some improvement in literacy appears to have taken place in recent years, especially in the rural sector, where the 7-plus age literacy rate for males has increased by over 4 percent and the rate for females by about 6 percent since2004-05.National and state policies with specific target-can address these disparities and canachieve higher level outcomes in an inclusive manner, which is the real goal for human development in education.

**REFERENCES**

NSS Report No. 532: Education in India, 2007-08: Participation and Expenditure | NSS Report No. 531: Education in India, 2009-10. | UNESCO (2010), Report on Human Development |