



Insights on International Literacy Day: Key Factors Behind India's Literacy Growth

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ABSTRACT: International Literacy Day, observed annually on September 8, was organized by UNESCO in 1966 to stress the significance of literacy for individuals, communities, and societies as a whole. The day aims to raise awareness about the issues caused by illiteracy and highlights literacy as an essential tool for human dignity, equality, and sustainable development. Each year, the observance adopts a specific theme addressing topics such as skill development, multilingual education, and digital literacy and likewise this year theme is "Promoting literacy for world in transition: Building the foundation for sustainable and peaceful societies. In 2024 the emphasis shifted to "Promoting Multilingual Education: Literacy for Mutual Understanding and Peace. While, in 2025 theme is "Promoting literacy in the digital era". Globally, countries like Finland, Norway, and Ukraine have reached universal literacy, whereas nations such as Chad, Mali, and South Sudan continue to face challenges due to poverty, conflict, and inadequate infrastructure. In India, the literacy rate stands at approximately at 80.9%, with states like Kerala and Mizoram exhibiting higher literacy levels. However, challenges persist in regions like Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, where disparities between genders and rural versus urban areas remain prominent. Government initiatives such as Saakshar Bharat, NIPUN Bharat, along with digital platforms like DIKSHA, work towards reducing these gaps. Literacy also significantly contributes to the empowerment of women, especially in the agricultural sector, by enabling them to increase productivity and participate in decision-making processes. Technology plays an essential part in enhancing literacy by providing easier access to education through online resources, applications, and digital tools, which was especially vital during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, literacy extends beyond the ability to read and write. It forms the cornerstone of economic development, social advancement, and sustainable growth. International Literacy Day serves as a reminder that despite progress, ongoing efforts are crucial to achieving universal literacy and ensuring equal educational opportunities for everyone.

Keywords: Economic Growth, Empowerment, Literacy Rate, Poverty, Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs-4), Sustainable Growth.

INTRODUCTION

International Literacy Day is distinguished worldwide annually on 8th September. UNESCO officially declared the day during its 14th general conference on October 26, 1966, and the first-time celebration was held in 1967 (UNESCO). The day's primary purpose is highlighting the significance of literacy for people, communities, and societies. It draws attention to ongoing global challenges related to illiteracy and promotes efforts to ensure that everyone has access to basic reading, writing, and numerical skills (Arya *et al.*, 2024); Many countries participate in the celebrations to

raise awareness about the vital role literacy plays in empowering people and advancing social progress. Additionally, the day highlights for the world the vital importance of literacy in preserving human dignity, promoting equality, and supporting sustainable development. International Literacy Day (ILD) promotes the connection between literacy and sustainable socio-economic development. Each year, the celebrations focus on specific themes that highlight various aspects of literacy. 'Literacy and Skills Development,' emphasized the need to equip young people with lifelong learning opportunities and essential skills to thrive in today's world.

History of the background

International Literacy Day was established by UNESCO on October 26, 1966, during the 14th session of its General Conference. The idea was first proposed at the World Conference of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy held in Tehran, Iran, in 1965. Following this, UNESCO officially declared September 8 as International Literacy Day, with the first celebration taking place in 1967," (UNESCO, 2025b). The day is observed annually worldwide to focus on the significance of literacy for individuals, communities, and societies, emphasizing that literacy is fundamental to building an educated and capable society. It also serves as a reminder to the global community of the vital role literacy plays in promoting human dignity, equality, and sustainable development (Lal *et al.*, 2023).

Theme of International Literacy Day (ILD)

International Literacy Day 2023 was "Promoting literacy for world in transition: Building the foundation for sustainable and peaceful societies. In 2024 the emphasis shifted to "Promoting Multilingual Education: Literacy for Mutual Understanding and Peace. While, in 2025 theme is "Promoting literacy in the digital era," (UNESCO, 2025a; Jaiswal, 2025).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilizes a secondary data research method to explore the importance and influence of International Literacy Day in promoting global literacy. The research is based on qualitative as well as quantitative data gathered from various reputable sources such as academic journals, books, government reports, UNESCO publications, and materials from other international bodies (Lal & Samadder 2020; Srivastava & Lal 2021). Relevant statistics, policy documents, and reports were reviewed to understand the progress, challenges, and initiatives associated with literacy promotion worldwide. The collected data were analysed thematically to highlight key trends, strategies, and outcomes related to International Literacy Day and its role in advancing the goal of universal education.

Literacy Rate in India

India defines literacy rate as the percentage of people aged seven and above who can read and write with understanding; this is called the "effective literacy rate" and uses only the population aged seven and above as the denominator. The "crude literacy rate" measures the percentage using the total population—including children below seven years.

Understanding Literacy Rate

According to the Indian census (since 1991), a person is counted as literate if they can read and write with understanding in any language, and the effective literacy rate is found using the following formula:

$$\text{Effective literacy rate} = \frac{\text{Number of literate person age 7 or above}}{\text{population aged 7 above}} \times 100$$
$$\text{Crude literacy rate} = \left(\frac{\text{Number of literacy person}}{\text{Total population}} \right) \times 100$$

The top performing states in India in terms of literacy

In India literacy rate have achieved very high literacy rates because of good education highest literacy rate of Kerela 96.2%. Bihar has very low literacy rate despite being among the top 10 most population state in India (Table 1).

Table 1: Ten most literate State in India.

Sr. No.	State	Literacy Rate in Percentage
1	Kerela	96.2%
2	Delhi	88.7%
3	Uttarakhand	87.6%
4	Himachal Pradesh	86.6%
5	Assam	85.9%
6	Maharashtra	84.8%
7	Punjab	83.7%
8	Tamil Nadu	82.9%
9	Gujarat	82.4%
10	West Bengal	80.2%

(Source: NSSO, 2019)

Bottom Five States in India apropos literacy

Several states in India continue to face major challenges in raising literacy rates. Andhra Pradesh has the lowest literacy at 66.4%, due to factors like poverty, limited school access, and inadequate educational infrastructure (Table 2). While, Rajasthan follows with a literacy rate of 69.7%, Bihar, with 70.9%, struggles despite improvements, mainly because of its high population density and scarce resources. Telangana (72.8%) and Uttar Pradesh (73.0%) also lag behind the national average, facing issues such as rural-urban disparities, poverty, and lack of education awareness.

Table 2: Bottom Five States in India apropos literacy.

Sr. No.	State	Literacy Rate in Percentage
1.	Andhra Pradesh	66.4%
2.	Rajasthan	69.7%
3.	Bihar	70.9%
4.	Telangana	72.8%
5.	Uttar Pradesh	73.0%

(Source: NSSO, 2019)

Highest literacy rate in the world

Some country around the world have achieved universal literacy, with rates reaching 100%. Countries such as Ukraine, Uzbekistan, North Korea, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan show how strong schooling systems and compulsory education can make this possible. In the same way, Finland and Norway, which are famous for their excellent education systems, have made sure that every person gets a chance to learn. Smaller places like

Georgia, Luxembourg, and Guam have also achieved full literacy by making good education policies, involving communities, and investing in people's growth. These examples prove that if education is given proper importance, universal literacy can be achieved, which then helps in social progress, economic growth, and creating equality. In world, some countries have achieved very high literacy rates 100% because of good education.

Lowest literacy rate in the world

Many countries around the world still have very low literacy rates because of poverty, wars, and limited

access to schools. Chad has the lowest at just 27%, followed by Mali (31%) and South Sudan (34.5%), where conflict makes education difficult. Afghanistan (37.3%), the Central African Republic (37.5%) and Niger (38%) also face problems like weak infrastructure and inequality in schooling. Somalia (41%), Guinea (45.3%), Burkina Faso (46%), and Benin (47%) are slightly better but still remain low (Fig. 1). These numbers show the urgent need for peace, global support, and investment in education so that these nations can raise literacy and build a better future for their people.

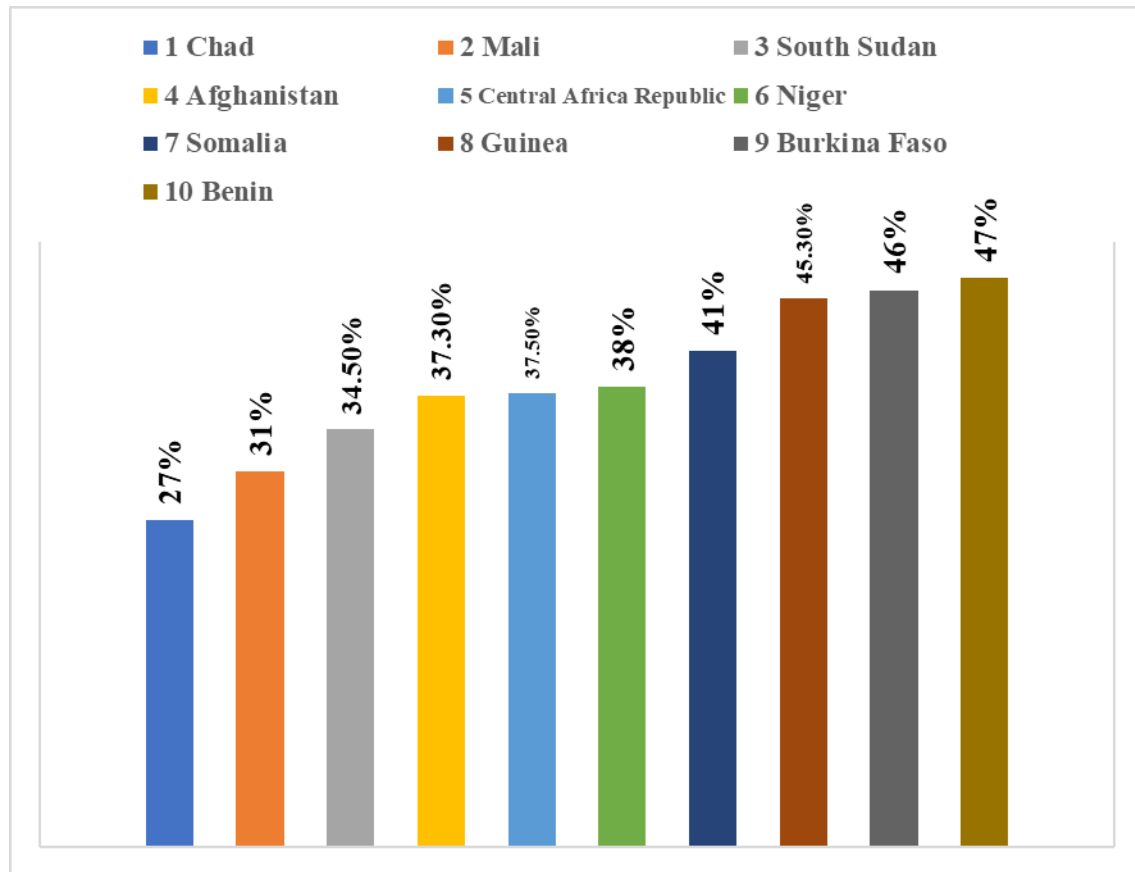


Fig. 1. Top Ten least literate countries in the world.

Literacy and sustainable development

Literacy and sustainable development are closely connected because literacy provides the foundation for individuals and communities to grow and thrive in a sustainable way. Literacy is not just about reading and writing; it enables people to acquire knowledge, develop skills, and make informed decisions that impact their social, economic, and environmental well-being. Higher literacy levels help individuals understand important issues like climate change, resource management, and disaster preparedness, which are essential for building resilient, sustainable communities (Ismail *et al.*, 2024). UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) program provides

people with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to adopt environmentally responsible behaviours and respond to global challenges (Habib & Nisar 2024). When individuals are literate, they are better able to participate in sustainable economic activities, pursue vocational training, and become active contributors to society. In this way, ESD and literacy together help move communities and nations closer to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by empowering people to make informed choices for their lives and the planet (Faiz & Yusoff 2025; Bergman *et al.*, 2018).

Key Factors Behind India's literacy growth

India's literacy has improved to several important programme and policies (Fig. 2). Mid-Day Meal Scheme give free meal to children at school, which help them attend regularly and stay healthy, especially those from families. The Samagra Shiksha programme supports education from early year to high school by focusing on good teaching, better school facilities, and digital tools (Patel, 2025). Awareness campaign encourages parents, especially in village, to send their children to school and break obstacles like gender bias.

Scholarship helps reduce financial struggles for poor families, so talented student can keep studying. The Right to Education Act (2009) made education free and compulsory for children aged 6 to 14, making school available to more kids. The Saakshar Bharat Mission, started in 2009, boosted adult education, especially for women, helping to lower illiteracy and empower underprivileged groups. Together, these efforts have helped India make great progress in literacy and education (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Key Factors Behind India's literacy growth.

Literacy in India: Present Scenario and Government Efforts

India has made steady progress in literacy, with the National Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023–24) reporting an overall literacy rate of about 80.9%. However, there is a noticeable gender gap: male literacy is around 87.2%, while female literacy lags at 74.6%. Urban areas tend to have a higher literacy rate (88.9%) compared to rural areas (77.5%). States like Kerala, Mizoram, and Lakshadweep have nearly universal literacy, but states such as Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh still face challenges. To address these disparities, the government has introduced several initiatives, including the National Literacy Mission, the Saakshar Bharat Mission focused on rural women's literacy, and the more recent National Education Policy (2020), which stresses foundational literacy and numeracy targets through the NIPUN Bharat Mission. Programs like Samagra Shiksha and digital platforms such as DIKSHA also support education access (Sarkar & Gaur 2025). Despite the progress, achieving universal literacy with equity remains a key focus, especially for women, rural populations, and marginalized groups.

Relationship between education and women in agriculture

Agriculture in many developing countries does not reach its full potential because women, who make up a big part of the farming workforce, do not get the same access to resource, training and opportunities as men. Women work as farmer, labourers and business owners, but they face more challenges in getting land, loans, markets, and farming services. Education is very important in reducing this gap. Gender equality is recognized as a Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on its own, and it is closely linked to achieving the targets of reducing extreme poverty and hunger (Patil *et al.*, 2018). Agricultural literacy enables farmers to adopt sustainable and eco-friendly farming practices that improve soil health and productivity. It promotes informed decision-making, supporting environmental conservation and the attaining SDGs (Yadav *et al.*, 2024). When women are educated, they can learn new and better farming methods, use government programs, and make smarter choices that increase farm productivity. With better knowledge and skills, women not only improve their farming but also help strengthen food security, reduce poverty, social sustainability and support economic growth (Wani & Kumar 2024).

Education also gives women more confidence and power to take part in decision-making, cooperatives, and community activities. Supporting education for women in agriculture is therefore both a step toward equality and a strong way to achieve sustainable rural development and social progress (Samantroy, 2020).

Role of Technology in Promoting Literacy

In today's world, technology has made learning much easier and more accessible. With smartphones and the internet, students can learn anytime and anywhere, not just in classrooms. In India, platforms like DIKSHA, SWAYAM, and e-Pathshala offer free study materials in many languages, helping close the gap between city and village education. Audio books, podcasts, and apps are great resources for those who can't attend school regularly, allowing them to learn at their own speed. Around the world, online literacy programs, virtual classes, and AI tools help reach people who might be left out. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital learning kept education going for millions. Technology also supports special needs learners with tools like screen readers and captioned videos. People who are literate are better able to use green technologies, understand environmental regulations, and make decisions that use less energy and produce less pollution. Societies may promote sustainable urban planning and inspire communities to support government efforts that support green-certified developments by including environmental literacy into educational curriculum (Jain & Babu 2024). Digital literacy is just as important as reading and writing now because it helps people take part in today's information-based economy (Digital Empowerment Foundation, 2022; Raj & Gupta 2025). By making education more interactive, affordable, and accessible, technology plays a big part in helping achieve "Education for All" goals.

CONCLUSIONS

International Literacy Day is celebrated every year on September 8 and was started by UNESCO in 1966. This day reminds us how important reading, writing, and basic math skills are for people and communities. Even though many people have learned these skills, millions still struggle, so the day encourages everyone to help spread literacy everywhere. It also connects literacy with making the world better socially and economically, showing how learning new skills is important for growth. In India, there has been a lot of improvement in literacy, but there are still differences between men and women, and between city and rural areas. The government has various programs to help everyone learn, like focusing on women's education and using technology for easy learning. Technology today helps a lot, especially with online classes and apps, making education available to people who can't go to school and helping those with disabilities. Overall, literacy is much more than just reading and writing; it gives people dignity, equality, and the chance

to take part in today's economy and society. It's also key for supporting a sustainable future for everyone. International Literacy Day reminds us that even though progress has been made, work still needs to be done to make sure everyone has the chance to learn and grow in a fair and peaceful world.

FUTURE SCOPE

The International Day of Rural Women, observed on October 15, highlights their crucial role in agriculture, food security, biodiversity, and rural development. They serve as both food producers and family caretakers, yet often encounter significant barriers such as limited access to education, healthcare, land ownership, finances, and positions of leadership. Despite challenges like limited access to education, healthcare, land, and resources, they lead in climate resilience through eco-friendly farming, seed conservation, and reforestation. In India, growing literacy among rural women reflects the impact of policies and community initiatives. Empowering them is vital for gender equality, poverty reduction, climate adaptation, and sustainable global progress.

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Conflict of Interest. None.

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