India's Goal of 100% Literacy by 2030 – The Bihar Challenge

Mains: *GS II – Issues Relating to Development and Management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.*

Why in News?

The national ambition of full literacy faces a major obstacle in the form of Bihar's non-participation in the Centre's flagship adult literacy programme, ULLAS.

What is the ULLAS scheme ?

- **ULLAS** – *The ULLAS (Understanding Lifelong Learning for All in Society) scheme was launched by the Union Government in 2022 to address adult illiteracy in a structured and measurable manner.*
- **Key Features of ULLAS**
  - Targets non-literate persons aged 15 years and above
  - Door-to-door identification through surveys
  - Training in basic literacy and numeracy (up to Class 3 level)
  - Focus on functional literacy, including Reading, writing, numeracy and Digital and financial literacy.
  - Assessment through a standardized test
  - Successful learners receive a literacy certificate
- **Definition of literate state** – The scheme defines a State/UT with 95% literacy as being "fully literate", acknowledging practical limitations in achieving absolute universality.
- **ULLAS Alignment with NEP 2020 –** NEP 2020 explicitly calls for:
  - Adult education "as soon as possible"
  - Lifelong learning frameworks
  - Functional literacy beyond rote learning
- ULLAS operationalises these goals by combining literacy with life skills, making it central to India's education reform agenda.
- Literacy is a foundational pillar of human development and democratic participation.
- It directly impacts employment, health outcomes, gender equality, and

economic growth.
- Recognising this, India has committed to achieving *100% literacy by 2030*, in line with the *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* and the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-4).*

What is the current status of literacy in India?

- **PLFS** – According to the *Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023–24:*
- **National literacy rate (age 7+) –** 80.9%
  - Male literacy – 87.2%
  - Female literacy – 74.6%
- **Fully literate states** – Five States/UTs have already declared themselves fully literate under ULLAS:
  - Himachal Pradesh
  - Mizoram
  - Goa
  - Tripura
  - Ladakh
  - Several other States and one Union Territory are close to achieving this status.
- **Bihar's Literacy Indicators**
  - Literacy rate (2023–24 PLFS) - 74.3%
  - Second lowest in India.
  - Female literacy - *66.1%*
- Nearly 2 crore non-literate persons aged 15–59
  - 67 lakh males.
  - 1.32 crore females.
- Historically, Bihar has lagged behind:
  - 2011 Census literacy rate - 61.8% (lowest in India)
  - Persistent gender and rural-urban gaps.
- Given these figures, Bihar carries one of the highest illiteracy loads in the country, making its absence from ULLAS a major concern.

What has been the union government's response?

- **Financial and Administrative Measures**
  - Rs.35.09 crore approved for Bihar in 2023–24.
  - Rs.15.79 crore (75% of central share) released.
- **Shortcoming from Bihar** – The state did not:
  - Submit annual plans.
  - Transfer funds to the Single Nodal Agency (SNA).

    - Implement programme activities and the Funds remain unutilised.
- **Ministerial Intervention –** In October 2024, Union Education Minister wrote to the Bihar Chief Minister, highlighting:
    - The urgency of Bihar's participation
    - The scale of adult illiteracy
    - The risk to India's 2030 literacy goal
- The Centre also warned of interest penalties due to delayed fund transfers, as per Department of Expenditure norms.

Why has Bihar not joined the ULLAS scheme?

- **Bihar's own scheme** – Bihar has cited the existence of its own literacy programme, *Akshar Anchal*, as the primary reason for non-participation.
- **Akshar Anchal Scheme –** It is operational for nearly 15 years
- **Targets –** The scheme targets the following
    - Dalits, Mahadalits
    - Minority communities
    - Extremely Backward Classes
    - Women
- **Focus areas**
    - Schooling for children (6–14 years)
    - Basic literacy for women (15–45 years)
- **Challenges of the scheme** – While Akshar Anchal addresses important social groups, it lacks:
    - National standardisation
    - Certification parity
    - Integration with NEP-aligned monitoring mechanisms

What are the broader issues involved?

- **Centre–State Coordination –** Education is a Concurrent List subject, requiring cooperation rather than parallelism.
- Bihar's refusal highlights coordination challenges in federal governance.
- **Standardisation of Literacy Outcomes –** ULLAS provides:
    - Uniform definitions
    - Common assessment frameworks
    - National comparability
- **Gender Inequality –** With female literacy at just 66.1%, Bihar's non-participation disproportionately affects women's empowerment and workforce participation.
- **National Credibility –** India's commitment to SDGs and NEP 2020

depends on inclusive participation by high-burden states.

What should be done?

- **Cooperative Federalism –** Centre and Bihar should explore convergence between ULLAS and Akshar Anchal
- Allow flexibility while ensuring national standards
- **Outcome-Based Monitoring –** Independent assessments
    - Transparent reporting
    - Integration with Census and PLFS data
- **Focus on Women and Marginalised Groups –** Community-based learning centres
- Incentives for female learners
- Use of local languages and digital tools
- **Political and Administrative Will –** Literacy must be treated as a developmental priority, not an administrative formality.

What lies ahead?

- India's aspiration of achieving 100% literacy by 2030 is both laudable and necessary for inclusive development.
- However, the goal remains unattainable without the active participation of high-burden states like Bihar.
- While state-specific initiatives have value, alignment with national frameworks such as ULLAS is essential to ensure uniform standards, accountability, and measurable outcomes.
- Resolving the Bihar impasse through cooperative federalism will be decisive in determining whether India's literacy mission becomes a reality or remains an unfulfilled promise.

Reference

[The Indian Express| 100% Literacy and Bihar's Challenge]

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