

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**
 - ₹35.09 crore approved for Bihar in 2023-24.
 - ₹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 Hindu](#) | [The Indian Express](#)