

Digital Literacy for Rural India: The ULLAS Initiative's Journey towards Education for All, Lifelong Learning and Village Transformation

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Abstract: Aligned with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, THE ULLAS (Understanding Lifelong Learning for All, Lifelong Learning for All in Society) initiative aims to bridge the urban-rural divide through digital literacy and adult education in villages. By integrating technology and community volunteerism, ULLAS seeks to equip rural populations with foundational literacy, numeracy, vocational skills, and lifelong learning capabilities. This study analyses the implementation, challenges, and outcomes of ULLAS. It examines the initiative's impact. The paper highlights key successes and scalability issues, and offers policy recommendations to strengthen the program.

Keywords: NEP2020, ULLAS initiative, Adult Education, Rural Development, SDG.

“Strong and innovative government initiatives for adult education in particular, to facilitate community involvement and the smooth and beneficial integration of technology - will be effected as soon as possible to expedite this all-important aim of achieving 100% literacy”

NEP 2020 para 21.4

INTRODUCTION

India's population, surpassing 1.4 billion, has a literacy rate of around 72.98%. Low literacy limits individuals' ability to access information, understand health and safety guidelines, manage finances, and participate fully in society, which are crucial for sustainable growth. It hampers workforce productivity and innovation, restricts economic diversification, and exacerbates inequalities (Bhattacharya, 2018). In rural areas, the situation is more challenging,

where low literacy severely restricts access to information, financial services, healthcare, and governance. The gap hampers workforce productivity, economic diversification, and village development. Improving literacy is vital for empowering people, enhancing social inclusion, and fostering a skilled workforce that can drive sustainable economic development and address environmental challenges (Johnson et al., 2016). Alongside NEP-2020, UN SDG 4.6 requires that “*By 2030, ensure that all youth and adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy*” (Dodds, F. 2015). Achieving 100% literacy requires multifaceted approaches, including enhancing access to education, integrating technology, involving communities, and tailoring programs to adult learners' needs, ensuring every citizen is equipped with basic reading and writing skills. The Government of India's recent initiative of ULLAS through the Ministry of Education under the umbrella of the New India Literacy Program (NILP) aims to eliminate illiteracy even for the public who have left their studies due to personal or emotional reasons, to continue their climb up the ladder of progression in their field of work. The initiative's five main goals, aligned with NEP 2020, are to promote foundational literacy, life skills, basic education, vocational skills, and ongoing learning. It focuses on marginalized groups like nomads, laborers, and construction workers. Priority is given to districts with the lowest literacy rates and large SC/ST/Minority populations, starting with those aged 15-35, then older adults. For the implementation of this novel idea, a budget of 1034 crore has been funded by the government of India. A study of such initiatives is necessary to understand how funds are absorbed by various states in India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Adult education in India has historically extended educational opportunities to individuals who missed the chance at formal education, have passed the age for formal education, and now wish to study. Adult Education mostly focused on basic reading. The reason for this was that when India gained independence in 1947, over 86% of its people were illiterate. Since 1951, the Indian government has started a number of projects and schemes to promote adult literacy. There were prior programs run by the Government of India to boost adult education in India. But to fulfill the aim of 100 percent literacy cannot be achieved if only Adults are kept in view. “Education For All” is an alternative to “Adult Education” by the Ministry. (Guidelines of New India Literacy Program, n.d.)

Table 1: Various Literacy programs by Government of India:

YEARS	LITERACY PROGRAMMES
1951-56	Social Education
1959	Gram Shikshan Mohim
1967-68	Farmer's Functional Literacy Project (FFLP)
1975-76	Functional Literacy for Adult Women (FLAW)
1978	National Adult Education Programme
1986	Rural Functional Literacy Project (RFLP) & Mass Programme of Functional Literacy (MPFL)
1988	National Literacy Mission Authority (NLMA)
2009	Saakshar Bharat: Scheme of Adult Education and Skill Development
2020-22	Pradhna Likhna Abhiyan

(Source: Guideline of New India Literacy Programme, n.d.)

As illustrated in Table 1, from 1951 to 1976, schemes such as Early programs like Social Education, FFLP, and FLAW focused on basic literacy, leadership, and social awareness, helping illiterate women gain practical skills and improve their knowledge of health, hygiene, and childcare. Later schemes from 1978 to the present have eradicated illiteracy not only among older age groups but also among those in marginalized areas eager to be educated literacy and digital skills to development outcomes, including higher productivity, better health, civic participation, and reduced inequality (UNESCO, 2014; Dreze & Sen, 2013).

The following table depicts the aim of the Schemes and initiatives in various years and their achievements.

Table 2: Aims and Achievement of Various educational schemes from 1978 to 2009

Year	Scheme Fundings	Aim to Educate	Achievement
1978		Education 100 million non-literate adults	
1986	National Service Scheme (NSS)		The start of the NLM was in 1988, 127.45 million persons were made literate. 597 districts In India where Total Literacy Campaign till March, 2007 and 485 districts covered under Post Literacy Phase where 328 districts covered under Continuing Education Programme where 1,97,612 Continuing Education Centers and 20,939 Nodal CECs were functional.
1988		To impart Functional Literacy to 70 million non-literates	7.64 crore been certified as literates since 2009 who were non literate.
2009		Financial outlay of Rs.142.61 crore to impart Functional Literacy to 57 lakh non-literates	Implementation in 33 States/UTs during FYs 2020-22.

(Source: Department of School Education & Literacy)

NEW INDIA LITERACY PROGRAMME (NILP)

The NILP is a government initiative to improve adult literacy for those 15 and older in India. Running from 2022-23 to 2026-27 with a budget of Rs. 1037.90 crore, it supports five main areas: foundational literacy and numeracy, critical life skills (including digital, financial, and legal literacy), basic education, vocational skills, and continuing education. The program relies on volunteers and delivers content in local languages via the DIKSHA platform. It aims to

reach 5 crore learners in five years. Initial challenges include setting up bank accounts for agencies to ensure the smooth distribution of funds. Implementation steps include identifying beneficiaries, training volunteers, conducting surveys, and using the DIKSHA portal to access teaching materials.

Table 3: Ranking of States according to Literacy Rate and their Funding:

State and UT	Literacy rate rank wise	Male Literacy rate	Female Literacy rate	Funds allocated
Kerala	94%	96.11%	92.07%	1,99,82,300
Mizoram	91.33%	93.35%	89.27%	43,69,794
Goa	88.70	92.65%	84.66%	45,08,660
Tripura	87.22%	91.53%	82.73%	1,60,14,700
Delhi	86.21%	90.94%	80.76%	1,62,13,080
Puducherry	85.85%	91.26%	80.67%	41,11,900
Himanchal Pradesh	82..80%	89.53%	75.93%	2,07,75,820
Maharashtra	82.34%	88.38%	75.87%	12,61,15,600
Sikkim	81.42%	86.55%	75.61%	55,99,750
Tamil Nadu	80.03%	86.77%	73.44%	9,83,42,400
Nagaland	79.55%	82.75%	76.11%	1,21,46,400
Uttarakhand	78.82%	87.40%	70.01%	3,00,99,680
Gujarat	78.03%	85.75%	69.68%	8,44,55,800
Manipur	76.94%	83.58%	70.26%	1,22,05,804
West Bengal	76.26%	81.69%	70.54%	11,42,12,800

Punjab	75.84%	80.44%	70.73%	4,27,96,000
Haryana	75.55%	84.06%	65.94%	3,44,55,800
Karnataka	75.36%	82.47%	68.08%	9,87,39,160
Meghalaya	74.43%	75.95%	72.89%	1,32,37,380
Odissa	72.87%	81.59%	64.01%	7,15,61,100
Assam	72.19%	77.85%	62.27%	13,64,31,360
Chhattisgarh	70.28%	80.27%	60.24%	3,98,20,300
Madhya pradesh	69.32%	78.73%	59.24%	10,92,53,300
Uttar Pradesh	67.68%	77.28%	57.18%	34,03,66,000
Jamu& Kashmir	67.16%	76.75%	56.43%	4,97,39,300
Andra Pradesh	67.02%	74.88%	59.15%	8,54,47,700
Rajasthan	66.11%	79.19%	52.12%	11,22,29,000
Arunachal Pradesh	65.38%	72.55%	57.70%	95,87,188
Bihar	61.80%	71.20%	51.50%	18,95,97,200
India	72.78%	80.88%	64.63%	

(Source: Official website of ULLAS and PIB ministry of education, NILP 2022)

Table 3 illustrates the literacy rates and funds allocated for adult education across various states and union territories (UTs) in India, ranked by literacy rate. Kerala has the highest literacy rate, followed by Mizoram and Goa. The allocation of funds varies significantly, with Kerala receiving the least amount. The data highlight an inverse correlation between literacy rates and allocated funds, suggesting that increased investment in education could enhance literacy rates. This analysis emphasizes the need for targeted educational funding, especially in regions with lower literacy rates, to achieve nationwide educational improvement. The highest funding is allocated to Uttar Pradesh, as its literacy rate is the lowest, though it is not lower than that of Arunachal Pradesh and Bihar, where more emphasis must be given. These regions, particularly

Bihar with the lowest literacy rate, require focused interventions to improve access to quality education and literacy programs, tailored to address the unique challenges and disparities they face, to uplift their literacy rates and contribute towards equal educational opportunities nationwide.

THE ULLAS INITIATIVE

The ULLAS (Understanding Lifelong Learning for All in Society) initiative is a transformative educational initiative launched by the Indian government. It aims to revolutionize literacy across the nation by creating a learning ecosystem that reaches everyone, bridging critical life skills and basic literacy. The initiative is primarily dedicated to advancing functional literacy, cultivating vocational proficiencies, and developing essential life competencies, including financial acumen, legal comprehension, and digital fluency. Furthermore, a key objective is to empower citizens to actively engage in national development. The initiative targets individuals aged 15 and above who did not have the opportunity to attend school and operates through volunteer participation. A significant milestone of the ULLAS initiative is the launch of a mobile application that serves as a digital entry point, enabling learners to access a variety of educational resources through the NCERT DIKSHA portal. The application is accessible on both Android and iOS devices and allows learners and volunteers to register either independently or with the help of surveyors. The initiative is committed to nurturing an environment of ongoing learning and knowledge sharing within communities throughout India. Under the banner and slogan “ULLAS: Nav Bharat Saksharta Karyakram,” the program represents the nationwide dissemination of knowledge, empowering people through education and sparking a passion for learning. Additionally, ULLAS encourages volunteer involvement by framing participation as a civic responsibility, or “Kartavya Bodh,” in support of national progress, and incentivizes student volunteers with academic credits and recognition, such as certificates and letters.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To Investigate the Integration of ULLAS with Existing Educational Frameworks.
2. Foresee the Societal Impact of Bridging Literacy Gaps.
3. To forecast the Scalability and Sustainability of the ULLAS Initiative.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. How does the ULLAS initiative align with and complement the goals and strategies of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020?"
2. "How does the ULLAS initiative's approach to bridging literacy gaps influence societal outcomes in terms of economic empowerment, social inclusion, and digital participation among Indian citizens?"
3. "What factors influence the scalability and sustainability of the ULLAS initiative across diverse Indian region?"

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The methodology of the paper is qualitative in nature. Researcher analyzed the data qualitatively.

In-depth research of reliable and valid Secondary sources of information from Ministry of Education is used in this study.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

How does the ULLAS initiative align with and complement the goals and strategies of the NEP 2020?" This question explores the synergies between the ULLAS initiative and the broader educational policies and frameworks set out in the NEP 2020. It seeks to understand how ULLAS contributes to the NEP's objectives of inclusivity, access, and quality education for all, and what this integration means for the future of educational reform and development in India. This movement is not only about literacy but also about building a future with empowered citizens who can contribute meaningfully to society. The ULLAS initiative, "Understanding Lifelong Learning for All in Society," is a centrally sponsored scheme. It targets non-literates aged 15 and older and aims to empower them by providing earlier educational opportunities. ULLAS also contributes to quality and accessible education across the country by facilitating a community/volunteer management program through which community members and volunteers interact directly with schools to share their knowledge and skills.

"How does the ULLAS initiative's approach to bridging literacy gaps influence societal outcomes in terms of economic empowerment, social inclusion, and digital participation

among Indian citizens?" This question aims to uncover the multifaceted impacts of improved literacy at the individual and community levels, focusing on economic opportunities, social engagement, and participation in an increasingly digital world. It seeks to understand the broader implications of literacy beyond individual learning achievements, including its effects on societal structures, economic development, and digital inclusivity. The ULLAS initiative has the potential to create a ripple effect that leads to broad societal improvements. When citizens are economically empowered, socially included, and digitally participative, they contribute more effectively to the nation's development and democratic processes. The ULLAS initiative is thus a critical move toward a fairer, wealthier society in India. The ULLAS initiative's approach to bridging literacy gaps can significantly influence societal outcomes in India in the following ways:

Economic Empowerment:

- **Job Opportunities:** Literacy is foundational for acquiring vocational skills that increase employability. By providing basic education, ULLAS helps individuals to become more competitive in the job market.
- **Entrepreneurship:** Education through initiatives like ULLAS can inspire and provide the necessary skills for starting small businesses, thereby fostering economic independence and growth.
- **Income Stability:** As individuals become literate, they can access better jobs and stable incomes, which contribute to the overall economic development of their communities and the country.

Social Inclusion:

- **Community Participation:** Literacy enables individuals to participate more fully in community activities and decision-making processes, leading to more cohesive societies.
- **Gender Equality:** By targeting education for all, ULLAS can help bridge the gender gap in literacy, empowering women and girls and promoting gender equality (MENA Report 2022).
- **Cultural Integration:** Education fosters understanding and respect for different cultures, contributing to a more integrated and inclusive society.

Digital Participation:

- **Digital Literacy:** ULLAS aims to impart literacy in digitization, which is part of the digital economy and accessing online services.
- **Access to Information:** Literacy and digital literacy ensure that individuals can benefit from the wealth of information available online, leading to informed decision-making.
- **E-Governance:** With improved literacy, citizens can participate in digital governance initiatives, enhancing transparency and accountability in public services.

"What factors influence the scalability and sustainability of the ULLAS initiative across diverse Indian regions?" This question seeks to identify and analyze the critical factors that enable or hinder the ULLAS initiative's ability to expand and maintain its operations effectively across India's varied geographical, cultural, and socio-economic landscapes. It also aims to propose strategies to enhance the program's resilience and adaptability, ensuring its continued contribution to educational development and literacy improvement.

Process of penetrating the ULLAS Program-

I. SLMA is a State Literacy Mission Authority: The State's appropriate Minister of Education will serve as the chairman of SLMA. The main responsibilities are to execute the programs in the states and territories and to create the states' and territories' yearly action plans in collaboration with the districts. The States/UTs will explicitly reference the plan's structure and strategy in their respective state action plans. The relevant SCERT will contain the State Center for Literacy (SCL), which will offer SLMA resources, academic, and technical assistance.

II. The State/UTs will creatively create and develop the district-level implementation structure and strategy in accordance with local circumstances, working with BRCs, State Education Departments, CRC, other government bodies, and DIETs. According to local circumstances and requirements, India its UTs and states will determine the strategy for planning, then for its implementation blueprint and governance at the grassroots level for rural and urban areas. The States/UTs will explicitly reference the structure and tactics in their respective action plans.

III. The framework created or already in place for a prior plan or schemes may be retained by the state or UT. The implementation structure and approach initially established will remain the same for the duration of the scheme in FYs 2022–2027 and may be extended further if the scheme is extended beyond FY 2026–2027.

ULLAS ADVANCING SDGS

The ULLAS initiative is a cornerstone of India's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), offering an inclusive, equitable, and lifelong learning framework that reflects the essence of Sustainable Development's aim for 2030. Its emphasis on adult education is a critical lever for poverty alleviation (SDG 1), as it unlocks job opportunities and nurtures economic independence. In the realm of agriculture and nutrition (SDG 2), it equips individuals with the knowledge to embrace sustainable practices and make healthier food choices. Health literacy, a key component of ULLAS, empowers individuals to make informed health decisions (SDG 3), while its alignment with SDG 4 reinforces its commitment to quality education through lifelong learning pathways.

ULLAS's approach to gender equality (SDG 5) aims to balance the scales by empowering women and girls through education, which also trickles down to improved water and sanitation management (SDG 6) through enhanced awareness of hygiene practices. The initiative acknowledges the role of literacy in promoting sustainable energy (SDG 7) and contributes to economic growth by providing vocational training (SDG 8), thereby boosting employment and entrepreneurship.

Contributing to innovation (SDG 9), ULLAS equips learners with the skills to navigate and contribute to the technological landscape. It is a powerful tool against inequality (SDG 10), ensuring education is accessible regardless of background, thereby fostering inclusive, safe, and resilient urban development (SDG 11). The initiative encourages sustainable lifestyles (SDG 12), raises awareness about climate change (SDG 13), and instills a sense of environmental stewardship (SDGs 14 and 15).

Promoting peaceful societies with access to justice (SDG 16), ULLAS fosters literacy as a foundation for active citizenship and governance. The power of collaboration (SDG 17) is at the initiative's core, with partnerships across government, volunteers, and communities driving its mission. ULLAS stands not only as an educational program but as a beacon for holistic development and social transformation, touching every aspect of sustainable development and collective progress.

CONCLUSION

In rural India, where literacy gaps have long constrained development, ULLAS is driving meaningful transformation in villages. It enhances economic opportunities through improved access to information, financial services, and digital markets; promotes women's empowerment; strengthens participation in local governance; and fosters a culture of lifelong learning. The initiative's volunteer-driven, technology-enabled approach not only advances the goals of NEP 2020 but also contributes substantially to SDG 4 and other interconnected Sustainable Development Goals. While challenges related to digital infrastructure, connectivity, and implementation in remote areas remain, ULLAS holds immense potential for scalable and sustainable impact. To realize its full vision, sustained investment, stronger community ownership, and integration with rural development schemes are essential. In conclusion, ULLAS is more than a literacy program — it is a catalyst for rural resurgence. Illuminating villages with the light of digital knowledge and lifelong learning paves the way for an empowered, equitable, and self-reliant rural India, truly revealing the vision of Education for All.

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