

Himachal Pradesh declared to be 'fully literate': what does this mean?

To become fully literate, states/UTs have to identify those who are not literate, and provide them with basic reading, writing, and math education so that they can clear the FLNAT

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Since the 1950s, there have been various Central and state government initiatives to improve adult literacy. This picture from 2018 is at an adults' classroom in Kerala during the 'Amma Goes to School' program. (Express Photo by K Shijith)

Earlier this week, Himachal Pradesh was declared to be a '[fully literate](#)' state, becoming the

fifth such state/Union Territory in India after Goa, Ladakh, Mizoram, and Tripura.

None of these, however, boast 100% literacy. Himachal claims to have a literacy rate of 99.3%, Goa 99.72%, Mizoram 98.2%, Tripura 95.6%, and Ladakh 97%. So what does it mean to be 'fully literate'?

How is literacy defined?

The Ministry of Education defines literacy as "the ability to read, write, and compute with comprehension i.e to identify, understand, interpret and create, along with critical life skills such as digital literacy, financial literacy etc." It defines 'full literacy' as "achieving 95% literacy in a State/UT".

The Ministry communicated these definitions to states/UTs last August. It felt the need to define these terms for ULLAS (Understanding Lifelong Learning for All in Society), a literacy programme for people over 15 who may not have attended school.

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The ULLAS program was launched in 2022 with the aim of achieving 100% literacy by 2030, which is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. The program is also in line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 which calls for adult education initiatives to achieve 100% literacy.

How does someone attain literacy?

Under the ULLAS program, adult learners are taught basic reading, writing, and math (arithmetic like addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) that a child in school would learn up to class 3. They are also taught how to read and measure time, make sense of calendars, use currency notes, write cheques, and safely make digital transactions.

This training is provided either through a mobile app or offline, by students or community volunteers. After that, the Functional Literacy Numeracy Assessment Test (FLNAT), a 150-mark reading, writing and numeracy test, is administered in a person's chosen language.

On passing the test, the learner is certified by the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) as having acquired foundational literacy and numeracy.

Other adult literacy schemes

ULLAS is the latest in a set of government initiatives to promote adult literacy from the 1950s onwards.

In the 1960s-70s, the Centre and several states ran programs targeting literacy among farmers and women.

The National Adult Education Programme was launched in 1978 to eliminate illiteracy in the 15-35 age group.

The National Literacy Mission, which ran from 1988 to 2009, also targeted this age bracket.

In 2009, the UPA government launched the 'Saakshar Bharat' (Literate India) scheme which it ran until 2018. Meant for people aged 15 and above, it also focused on functional literacy and numeracy.

How do states become 'fully literate'?

To learn who requires training under the ULLAS program, states conduct door-to-door surveys, or rely on other data (more on that later). Those identified as not being literate are given requisite training and administered the FLNAT.

The key to some states/UTs receiving the 'fully literate' tag is that the adults they identified as not being literate have cleared the FLNAT. This relies on their prior estimates of the number of people who are not literate.

In States/UTs where literacy levels (as per the 2011 Census) were already high, or where the population is relatively small, the process of identifying people who are not literate, imparting training, and making them clear the FLNAT works faster.

As per the Census of 2011, Goa had a literacy rate of 88.7%, Himachal Pradesh 82.8%, Mizoram 91.3%, and Tripura 87.2% — well above the country average of 74%.

How has literacy been measured in India so far?

For the 2011 Census, any person aged seven and above who can read and write with understanding in any language was considered literate. Among women, the literacy rate was 64.6%, while for men it was 80.9%. The Census also measured adult literacy — for those age 15 and above — for which the national figure was 69.3%.



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Since the 2011 Census, sample surveys by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation have been used to measure literacy.

* The National Sample Survey (NSS) 71st round (Jan-June 2014) showed an adult literacy rate of 71%. For Goa, this figure was 90%, while it was 83% in Himachal Pradesh, 96% in Mizoram, and 86% in Tripura. The NSS uses a similar definition for literacy as the Census — of being able to read and write with understanding in any language.

* The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for 2023-24 showed a national literacy rate of 77.5% (aged seven and above; similar definition of literacy as Census). For Tripura, this was 93.7%, for Mizoram 98.2%, for Goa 93.6%, and for Himachal Pradesh 88.8%.

The report also estimated that 22.3% of people in India age 15 and above were not literate. This figure was 2.2% in Mizoram (lowest for any state/UT), 7.3% in Goa, 7.4% in Tripura, and 12.7% in Himachal Pradesh. This figure was highest in Bihar (33.1%) followed by Andhra Pradesh (31.5%) and Madhya Pradesh (28.9%).

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