

## Patterns of Literacy and Education in Assam

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### I

Literacy is a *sin qua non* for development. It is supposed to generate other elements of modernisation such as, mobility, empathy, high participation, achievement orientation, rational ends-means calculations and so on. Several social scientists, Lerner (1964), Dube (1976), Damle (1976), Dubey (1976) have identified literacy as 'index and agent' of modernisation. Education Commission (1966 :5) observes education as 'only instrument' for change 'on a grand scale'. The expansion of literacy is a vital need particularly in the countries of the underdeveloped world (Myrdal -1968). For sustained growth it has been estimated that the achievement of minimum 40% literacy is a prime requirement of the 'take off' of an economy (Shukla-1976 :84). Studies of several parts of the world as well as of India (See Hovart : 1958, Balug, 1966, Chudhari : 1969, Kishore and Rai : 1974, Singh and Yadav : 1978) conclude literacy and education have positive influence on agriculture as well as rural development.

Development needs deliberate introduction of a series of change in socio-cultural sphere. Continuous planned efforts are being made since independence to achieve all round development of the country. Soon after independence, the country was rechristened by a new constitution into a sovereign democratic republic with the basic aim to secure to all its citizen justice, liberty, and equality. Expansion of mass literacy and education in every corner irrespective of caste, creed and community is indispensable to achieve constitutional goal of 'justice', liberty and equality'. The state's responsibility in this connection is earmarked in the 45th Article of the constitution that state should provide free and compulsory education to all children upto the age of fourteen years.

## II

The object of the present paper is to make an attempt to highlight the literacy pattern in relation to structural features, rural and urban, during the decade 1961-71. It has also been discussed the relationship between urbanisation and expansion of education at different levels. The entire paper is based on data available from census record of 1971 as well as other secondary sources.

Literacy has been a census question since the very beginning of the census in India in 1871. During the first three censuses ending 1891, the population was classified into three distinct groups i.e., 'Learning', 'Literate' and 'Illiterate'. Many irregularities followed this three fold distinction of population e.g., a student who was continuing his study, was included in both the categories of 'Learning' and 'Literate'. Thus this three fold distinction was changed into a two-fold i.e., 'Literate' and 'Illiterate' since 1901 census. (Natarajan, 1972 :5). The ordinary meaning of the term literacy is an elementary ability to read and write. The definition given to the term by UNESCO is, 'a person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement of his every day life.'<sup>1</sup> In principle, the term literacy has been used in the similar sense as that of UNESCO in the census of our country since 1911 onward. The census of 1971 has conceptualised the term literate and illiterate as, "a person who can both read and write in any language with understanding is to be taken as literate. A person who can merely read but cannot write is not to be treated as literate. The test for reading is the ability to read a portion of the Instruction Booklet for Enumerators. The test of writing is the ability to write simple letter. Children aged 4 and below are treated as illiterate (Saikia 1972 : 140)."

## III

Assam (including the Mizo Hills District, now the Union Territory of Mizoram) has recorded an overall literacy percentage of 28.72 according to 1971 census, which is slightly lower than the all India average (29.34%). A similar trend is noticed regarding the rate of literacy among the male population of Assam. The national average of male literacy

1. UNESCO, Manual of Educational Statistics, Paris 1961, P. 40, as quoted by G. Myrdal in his 'Asian Drama', Vol. III, London, 1968, P. 1970.

rate is 39.74 percent whereas that of Assam is 37.19 percent which is slightly lower. The literacy percentage among the females of Assam, which is 19.27 is slightly higher than the national average for female (18.44). The percentage of literacy of Assam (including present Meghalaya and Mizoram) in 1961 was 27.47 and hence the growth of literacy rate during the decade is only 4.88 percent which is the lowest recorded percentage of growth among all the States and Union Territories of the country whereas the growth of total population was 34.71%. On the other hand, the gross number of illiterate persons increased from seven million to ten million making Assam more illiterate in 1971 in gross terms than she was in 1961. Never-the-less, Assam is placed in the seventeenth position in the order of literacy percentage in 1971. The order is as follows: Chandigarh (61.6), Kerala (60.4), Delhi (56.4), Pondicherry (46.0), Goa, Daman & Diu (44.8), Laccadivi, Minicoy Isles (43.7), Andaman & Nicobar Isles (43.6), Tamil Nadu (39.5), Maharashtra (39.2), Gujarat (35.8), Punjab (33.7), West Bengal (33.2), Manipur (32.9), Himachal Pradesh (32.0), Karnataka (31.5) and Tripura (31.0) respectively.

The district wise break up of literacy of the State of Assam within their total population ranges from 36.62 percent in Sibsagar to 19.17 percent in the Mikir Hills District. Sibsagar, Cachar, Lakhimpur, Nowgong, Kamrup and North Cachar Hills have higher percentage of literacy in their total population than the state average rate of literacy (28.72%). The district wise male literacy rate varies from 44.32 percent in Sibsagar district to 26.93 percent in Mikir Hills District. It is also again Sibsagar district which has highest female literacy (27.92%) and the lowest is in the Mikir Hills District (10.19%). None of the districts has a higher female literacy rate than male literacy. The difference between male and female literacy is more pronounced in Goalpara district and the least in Darrang district.

**TABLE-I**  
**Level of Literacy in Assam, 1971.**

Areas	Threshold level 40%	Very High Level 40%-35%	High Level 35%-30%	Middle Level 30%-25%	Low Level 25%-20%	Very Low Level below 20%
All areas.	..	Sibsagar	Cachar	Kamrup Nowgong Lakhimpur <sup>1</sup> North Cachar Hills	Goalpara	Mikir Hills. <sup>2</sup>
Rural	..	..	Sibsagar	Nowgong Lakhimpur, Cachar	Kamrup Darrang North Cachar Hills.	Goalpara, Mikir Hills.
Urban	All districts.	..	..	..	..	..

1. Includes Dibrugarh District.

2. Now Karbi Anglong.

All the nine districts of the state are grouped in six different levels of literacy rate following Bowman-Anderson (1968 : 113-131) and Shukla (1976 : 84) as well as the arbitrary criterion of Tilak (1978 : 6). The classified groups are presented in the Table-I in three different categories. It is seen that none of the districts is at the threshold level (above 40% literacy rate) if the literacy is considered out of total population, whereas, all districts have achieved such a level in their urban sectors. As regards the literacy rate in total population, Sibsaagar is in very high level which is closed to threshold level, whereas, Mikir Hills District is in very low level. Literacy level in rural sector of districts shows Sibsaagar in high level and Goalpara as well as Mikir Hills Districts in very low level. The threshold level of literacy rate are yet to be achieved by the rural areas of all the districts.

TABLE-II

Percentage of total and literate population in rural, urban sectors, 1971.

State/ District	P.C. of Rural population	P.C. of Rural literate	P.C. of Urban population	P.C. of Urban literate	Difference between (3) & (5)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Assam <sup>1</sup>	91.13	25.80	8.87	58.69	32.89
Goalpara	92.26	19.55	7.74	50.82	31.27
Kamrup	88.23	24.81	11.74	58.51	33.70
Darrang	94.02	20.61	5.98	56.48	35.87
Nowgong	92.90	26.61	7.10	59.11	32.50
Sibsagar	91.58	34.38	8.42	60.93	26.55
Lakhimpur <sup>2</sup>	88.09	26.01	11.91	59.03	33.02
Mikir Hills. <sup>3</sup>	97.31	17.98	2.69	62.23	44.25
North Cachar Hills.	93.17	24.46	6.83	65.33	40.87
Cachar	92.08	27.79	7.92	62.89	35.13

Source : Census of India.

1. Assam total includes Mizoram.
2. Includes Dibrugarh District.
3. Now Karbi Anglong.

The data presented in the Table II represent the disparity of literacy within the population of two sectors as well as between rural and urban. The table shows the district wise break up of literacy in rural and urban sectors of each district. The data indicate literacy percentage of rural sector of each district falls somewhere between 17.98 percent and 34.38 percent. Sibsaagar district is relatively the most advanced district in this matter, whereas, Mikir Hills district is relatively the most backward making a difference of 16.40 percent between the most literate and the least literate. The data further reveal that districts that have high concentration of rural population happen to be the districts that have low rate of rural literacy. For instance, in order of percentage of rural population, Mikir Hills district ranks first and Sibsaagar district ranks

seventh. On the other hand, both of them rank ninth and first respectively in order of rural literacy rate.

The urban literacy ranges from 65.33 percent in North Cachar Hills district to 50.82 percent in Goalpara district making a gap of 14.51 percent between the most and the least literate districts. The remaining districts fall in between these two extremes. A similar trend is also revealed in respect of percentage of urban population and its relation to urban literacy rate which shows a highly urbanised district i.e., the district that has large number of urban population, not necessarily advances in respect of urban literacy. As for instance, Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills district have considerably low percentage of urban population in comparison to other districts i.e., 2.69 percent and 6.63 percent respectively, whereas both of them have 62.33 percent and 65.33 percent urban literate respectively which are third and first highest in order of urban literacy rate.

The disparity between urban and rural literacy rate is also presented in the Table II. It is highest in Mikir Hills District and lowest in Sibsagar district. Almost in all districts, the disparity is more than 30 percent except in Sibsagar district. The data further indicate, the district that has high percentage of rural population happens to be the district where disparity is also more, as for instance, Mikir Hills has highest percentage of rural population (97.31%) and here the disparity between rural and urban literacy rate is also the highest (44.25%).

TABLE - III

**P.C. of urban population and literate person with educational level, 1971.**

State/ District	Urban popula- tion	Primary	Middle School	Matri- culation and Higher Secon- dary	Non- techni- cal Diploma & Certi- ficate	Techni- cal Diploma & Certi- ficate	Graduate & above
Assam	8.87	37.46	26.29	6.32	0.23	0.11	1.40
Goalpara	7.74	43.60	24.59	4.52	0.09	0.06	0.87
Kamrup	11.74	34.33	28.36	8.13	0.14	0.12	2.43
Darrang	5.98	36.73	26.46	6.38	0.24	0.09	1.18
Nowgong	7.10	37.27	26.35	4.35	0.27	0.06	0.88
Sibsagar	8.42	35.89	28.40	6.57	0.27	0.15	1.49
Lakhimpur <sup>2</sup>	11.92	34.11	27.67	6.76	0.27	0.17	1.48
Mikir Hills <sup>3</sup>	2.62	35.24	20.30	3.58	0.19	0.05	0.73
North Cachar Hills.	6.83	34.65	30.25	7.53	0.00	0.02	1.97
Cachar.	7.92	43.41	24.48	7.49	0.15	0.10	1.10

Source : Census of India.

1. Assam includes Mizoram.
2. Includes Dibrugarh District.
3. Now Karbi Anglong.

With the data of table III, we turn to another field. The table provides district-wise distribution of literate population with different educational level i.e., primary, middle, matriculation and higher secondary, non-technical diploma and certificate, technical diploma and certificate as well as graduate and above. Goalpara district has the highest percentage of literate with primary educational level (43.60%) of its total literate persons and the lowest is in Lakhimpur district (34.11%) making a difference of 9.49 percent between the highest and the lowest. Now-

gong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts have 0.27 percent each of their total literate persons, non-technical diploma and certificate holders, and this is the highest percentage within this educational level. The lowest percentage of this level of education has been found in Goalpara district (0.09%) which is far below the state average (0.23%). Not a single person of this education level is found in the North Cachar Hills District. 0.17 percent of the total literate persons of Lakhimpur district have technical diploma and certificate and this is the highest percentage within this educational level. The percentage of population having graduate and above educational qualification is highest in Kamrup district (2.43%) and the lowest percentage of this category of literate persons is found in the Mikir Hills district (0.73%). It is observed, the districts that are advanced in the matter of literate with primary and middle school level of education within their total literate people may not necessarily be advanced with reference to literate person with educational level of matriculation to graduate and above. Goalpara district, for instance, which has the highest percentage of literate with primary level of education, has ranked seventh in respect of graduate level and above.

In order to find out the relationship between urbanisation and educational development, the percentage of urban population to the total population of a district is presented in the Table III. On comparing the percentage of literate population of each educational level, it is found, the districts that have larger urban population also tend to have larger number of literate population with educational level of primary, middle, non-technical diploma and certificate, technical diploma and certificate as well as graduate and above.

The following proposition may be deduced from the foregoing discussions and analysis.

- (a) The rural and urban population in percentage to total population of a district have a negative influence on the level of literacy in rural ( $r = -0.47$ ) and urban ( $r = -0.19$ ) areas respectively ;
- (b) The disparity between rural and urban literacy rates is considerably high in the district where the percentage of rural population in total population is also high ( $r = -0.65$ ) ;

- (c) A large number of urban population of a district tends to have a positive influence on the number of literate persons with educational level of
- (i) Primary (r—'93)
  - (ii) middle (r—'98)
  - (iii) matriculation and higher secondary (r—'99),
  - (iv) non-technical diploma and certificate (r—'99),
  - (v) technical diploma and certificate (r—'98) as well as
  - (vi) graduate and above. (r—'96)

#### IV

Perusal of foregoing analysis of the Census data reveals rural areas are far backward in comparison to urban areas in respect of literacy. Further there is also disparity in literacy within the rural sector of different district. Poor level of literacy is marked where concentration of rural population are considerably high. This may be of the fact that the infrastructural development needed for removal of illiteracy does not cope with the increase of rural population. There are still villages without even a primary school and in addition to this the schools are not within the reach of the young children. A larger concentration of rural population may also tend to have higher concentration of people belonging to lower socio-economic strata who have low, almost negative, consciousness for educating their children. The rural people primarily depend on agriculture activities. The poor peasants and landless labourers whose concentration is particularly high in the rural areas, cannot think of sending their children to school at the cost of their earning as child labourers which is considerably helpful for parents to reduce economic hardship (Sharma 1977 :5).

The urban sector of each district of the state is at threshold level with regards to urban literacy rate. In spite of this, the interesting and somewhat unexpected fact revealed by the data (Table II) is that higher the size of urban population lower the size of literacy within the urban population of the district. This inverse relationship is an important socio-economic phenomenon and leaves much scope for further investigation. The two hill districts of Assam i.e., Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills recorded a higher percentage of urban literacy within the urban popula-

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r Coefficient of correlation.

\* Significant at 1% level.

tion of these two districts than all other districts which belong to plain division. On the other hand all districts of plain division have recorded a somewhat low percentage of literacy within the urban population despite their greater infrastructural facilities.

It is observed that the urban sector of the plain division of the state is far advanced in comparison to hills division in regard to commercialisation and industrialisation. Besides this division is well net by a well developed road, railway as well as navigation system. All these lead to a rapid growth of commercial and industrial centres as well as a constant increase of urban population in the existing urban centres. It will necessarily increase the unskilled labourers most of whom are illiterate. Besides, a large number of rural migrant, who effort themselves by working as day labourers, are also illiterate. All these factors reduce the percentage of literacy in the urban sectors of these districts. Whereas the picture is reverse in the two districts of the hills division. There, all the urban sectors are the administrative headquarters in the districts and sub-divisions. There population is low, as well as most of them are workers, particularly of government and semi-government. Hence, the unskilled worker population is considerably low in comparison to the urban centres of plain districts. And these help to maintain a high percentage of urban literacy.

The percentage of urban population of a district has a positive influence on the percentage of literate with different educational level within its literate population where as the former is negatively associated with the rate of literacy in the urban sector. This is an usual phenomenon as all urban centres are also centres of educational institutions of various categories as well as they are large in numbers. In addition to this, most of the higher educational institutions of general education and all professional institutions as well as universities are located in the big urban centres of the state. Besides constant migration of educated people from rural to urban also helps to maintain the trend.

The foregoing analysis reveal an inequal expansion of literacy and education in spite of thirty years of post-independent planned efforts as well as constitutional guarantee. Probably the underlying fact of this backwardness may be "..... educational opportunities are better utilized by those regions and classes of population which are economically more

prosperous and socially more dynamic and organized. In contrast, those classes and regions which are economically backward and socially inert and unorganised suffer from serious handicaps in utilizing available educational opportunities (Joshi, 1969 : 209).”

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