

## CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE LITERACY DATA IN PAKISTAN

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### INTRODUCTION

Literacy rate is one of the elemental indicators that is utilized to get first hand information regarding the quality and caliber of the human resources in a particular region or country. This measure furnishes useful information not only to evaluate the current state of educational development of a nation but also provides benchmark data for planning to improve the quality of human capital. It is therefore, of paramount importance to have reliable data on this crucially important indicator. Literacy rate, in Pakistan, is generally obtained on the basis of information collected through the decennial Population Censuses. Nevertheless, literacy rates are also obtained as a by product based on the information collected through other surveys such as Labour force surveys etc.

In most of the developing countries like Pakistan, the quality of literacy data is generally poor and as such, cannot be used as a measure to assess the quality of human resources in the country. The results of some studies conducted by international agencies conclude that the actual literacy was almost 2 to 5 % less as claimed by various sources like Population Censuses and Labour Force Surveys (see for instance World Development Report, 1983). Nonetheless there are sizeable differences in literacy figures as reported by various sources. Any planning effort based on such controversial figures will, therefore, cause confusion and controversy. This highlights the need to evaluate the quality of data regarding literacy in such a manner that the

better sources can be identified on one hand and the poor sources may be improved on the other. This article, hence, briefly deals with the literacy situation in Pakistan but focuses more on the quality aspect of data produced through various sources.

### LITERACY TRENDS

The literacy rate was 13.2% in 1951, just after the inception of Pakistan. The pace of improvement in literacy rate remained too phlegmatic and it could hardly double (25.2%) by 1981 even after a span of thirty years. This increase was however not uniform over the years. This rate was 21.7% and 26.7% during 1972 census and 1973 HEO survey, respectively, which shows an astounding increase of 5% during just one and a half year. This explicates that there was no real change rather it could be due to some problem in the data set and its estimation. The literacy estimates of 1984 census were 26.2% which are slightly plunged than that of the figures reported by the HEO survey. There had been, however, a gradual increase in literacy from 1984-85 to 1987-88. The highest literacy rate was reported to be 37.9% by the 1986-87 Labour Force Survey. Table 1 presents the historical literacy situation in the country.

### MALE LITERACY

Data on male literacy depicts that it recorded an increase from 17% in 1951 to 35% in 1981. While HEO produced a figure of 37.8% which was slightly higher than 1981 literacy level. Male literacy further increased

during the period between 1981 to 1986-87 and touched the highest level of 52.4% but it dropped to 51.1% according to the 1987-88 LFS.

Table 1. Literacy rates by sex based on various sources

Sources	Literacy Rates (%)		
	Both Sexes	Male	Female
1951 POP. CENSUS	13.2	17.0	8.6
1961 POP. CENSUS	18.4	26.9	5.2
Im POP. CENSUS	21.7	30.2	11.6
1973 HED. SURVEY	26.7	37.8	13.4
1981 POP. CENSUS	26.2	35.0	16.0
1984-85 LFS	34.3	47.6	19.8
1985-86 LFS	35.3	49.0	20.3
1986-87 LFS	37.9	52.4	22.2
1987-88 LFS	37.1	51.1	21.9

Sources: 1 Population Census (1951, 1961, 1972, 1981)  
 2 Federal Bureau of Statistics (1986, 1987, 1989 and 1990)  
 3 Population census Organization (HED, 1973)

### FEMALE LITERACY

Improvement of literacy among the female population is not consistent with male population because it increased less than proportionately as compared to increase in male literacy. It is conspicuous from Table 1 that female literacy increased from 8.6% in 1951 to 21.9% in 1987-88. However female literacy level dropped in 1961. Similarly, literacy declined skeptically in 1986-87.

The analysis of data on literacy collected through the population census, Labour Force Surveys and Housing, Economic and Demographic Survey 1973 indicates that there are considerable differences in the literacy rate based on various sources mentioned above.

### GROWTH RATE

The annual average growth rate for literacy between 1972 to 1981 and from 1973 to 1987-88 stood at 2.2% and 2.3% respectively. A negative growth rate was recorded between 1973 HED to 1981 Census. However, the annual growth rate comes to 3.5% if calculated on the basis of 1972 Census to 1987-88 LFS, and it stands at 2.7 if calculated on the basis of 1984-85 to 1987-88 LFS. Growth rate for both sexes may be visualized in Table 2.

Table 1. Growth in literacy rate by sex

Sources	Growth Rates (%)		
	Both Sexes	Male	Female
1951-1961	3.4	4.7	2.4
1961-1972	1.5	1.1	3.2
1951-1981	2.3	2.4	1.5
1961-1973	3.2	2.9	4.2
1972-1981	2.2	1.8	3.9
1973-1981	-0.3	-1.2	1.0
1972-1987-88	3.5	3.4	4.1
1973-1987-88	2.3	2.1	3.4
1981-1987-88	4.9	5.4	4.4

Sources: 1 Population Census Organization (1984)  
 2 Federal Bureau of Statistics (1986, 1987, 1989 and 1990)  
 3 Population census Organization (HED, 1973)

It is obvious that annual average growth rate is more or less consistent if measured for the period between 1972 to 1981 Censuses, and 1973 HED to 1987-88 LFS. Quite contrarily, it gives a divergent picture if it is measured from 1973 HED to 1981 Census, 1972 census to 1987-88 LFS and 1981 Census to 1987-88 LFS which is presented in Table 3.

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The analysis boils down to the fact that the growth in literacy rate changes with a change in the base year. It is obvious that literacy rates reported in the 1972 and 1981 Censuses emerge to be under estimated because the 1973 HED Survey conferred nearly 5 % higher literacy rate just after one and a half year.. If the 1973 literacy rate is used as a base then literacy rates reflected in the Labour Force Surveys look precisely valid, because it increased from 26.7% in 1973 to 37.1 % in 1987-88 at a growth rate of 2.3 per cent per annum, and the growth rate corresponds with that of the period between 1972 and 1981 Censuses, (2.2 % per annum).

Table 3. Growth in Literacy rate during selected period

Period	Annual Average Growth rate (%)
1973-1981 Census	4.3
1972 Census to 1987-88 LFS	3.5
1981 Census to 1987-88 LFS	4.9

### QUALITY OF DATA

A glance at the above analysis raises the question which of the data sets is more akin to the reality. It is argued that the data produced in the HED and Labour Force Surveys are more precise compared to the Population Censuses on the following grounds.

a) It can be argued that census results are always trifling compared to survey results. This thesis has been supported by Fukuoka and Seki (1971: 95) and Bancroft, (1958:25) who inferred that sample surveys produce much better estimates than that of the decennial census results, substantially

because they use experienced survey enumerators instead of temporary census collections. Therefore, the literacy rate reported in 1972 Census was much submerged than that of the HED survey 1973. Similarly, there is an paroxysm that the 1981 census results were also relatively runty. It is worth mentioning that census enumerators in general are neither technical persons nor they collect the information with professional sense of responsibility as it is inflicted upon them without their consent. Conversely, the enumerators employed in the HED and the Labour Force Surveys were professional and adequately trained in their job as compared to the census crew.

b) The definition of literacy used in the 1981 Population Census is more rigid as compared to that used in the Labour Force Surveys (Table 4).

Table 4. Definitions of literacy used by various censuses and surveys

Source	Definitions
1951-CENSUS	Ability to read a dear print in any language.
1961-CENSUS	Ability to read simple letter in any language with understanding
1972-CENSUS	Ability to read and write with understanding.
1973- HED	Ability to read and write with understanding.
1981 - CENSUS	Ability to read a newspaper; and to write a simple letter.
Labour force surveys	ability to read and write in any language with understanding.
UNESCO	Ability to read and write a paragraph in any language with understanding.

Sources: 1 1972 and 1981 Population Census.  
2 1973-Housing, Economic and

Demographic Survey,

3 Labour Force Surveys, 1984-85 to  
1987-88

According to 1981 Census, a person is qualified to be enumerated as a literate only and only if "he/she can read a newspaper and write a simple letter". Obviously, newspapers are not available to an overwhelming majority of the rural dweller of Pakistan. It can, therefore, be perceived that most of them might have been reported as illiterate during 1981 Population Census.

c) On the contrary, most of the age cohorts of 10 to 14 years might have been reported as literate in the Labour Force Surveys due to conceptual flexibility that utters "all those who can read and write in any language with understanding" should be classified as literate.

d) Nevertheless, the annual average growth rate of primary school enrollment between 1980-81 and 1987-88 comes to be about 5%. This healthy increase in the environment rate also has a bearing on the improvement of literacy rate that has been depicted in the 1987-88 Labour Force Survey.

c) Besides, the literacy of age cohorts of 10-14 plays an important role in the level of overall literacy rate of a particular census or survey. It has been observed that the young population in this age group has been generally classified as literate in the sample surveys whereas major segment of this group of the population has been classified as illiterate in the censuses. The population in this age group possessing education "literate in the HED and the Labour Force Surveys because the definition of literacy is comparatively simple than that used in the 1981 census.

## CONCLUSION

It boils down from the analysis conducted in the previous sections that data on literacy is generally available through Population Censuses and Labour Force Surveys, computed out by the Population Census Organization and the Federal Bureau of Statistics, respectively. These sources of data do not provide a precise estimate of literacy rate partly because the definitions used in censuses and surveys are not designed to work out literacy rates. Further, due to conceptual controversies, the literacy rates are not consistent with each other. It can be exhorted that a National literacy Survey may be carried out to evaluate the state of literacy in the country. The standard definition of literacy (a person who can read and write a paragraph in any language with understanding) recommended by UNESCO may be adopted in the proposed survey.

A dismally low literacy rate requires serious attention from the planners and policy makers. Literacy can only be increased effectively by concentration both on the universal primary education and a mass adult literacy campaign. This experiment has produced encouraging results in various developing countries (for example in Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines and Tanzania) that today have attained high literacy rates. Therefore, we should not only accentuate the significance of primary schooling but also suitable motivational adult literacy maneuvers should be provoked to counter menace of illiteracy.