

Status of Female Literacy and Social bias against Women in India

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Abstract

Role of education and particularly female education in the development process is well documented. Economists of the classical period have also highlighted this association, which is similarly reconfirmed in present times. Besides the social and economic benefits of education, female literacy is considered a bet in improving the health and basic child care. Higher literacy rates show lower poverty ratios amongst different parts of the world. India has also shown a tremendous increase in its literacy rates since independence, but it too holds the largest concentration of poor people in the world. Increasing literacy is considered a harbinger for economic development. This has been postulated to be tested through the case of India. District level analysis of female literacy and its spatial correspondence with asset less population of India in 2011 is ascertained. The present paper attempts to determine the spatial patterns of female literacy and economic development in India. Higher female literacy rate districts are noted for lower proportions of poor populations.

Keywords: *Female literacy, Social bias, Opportunities for women, Social programmes for women, Policy perception, Women empowerment.*

Introduction

Literacy is one of the most essential indicators of the quality of a country's human capital. Latest data puts India's adult literacy rate at 73.2 percent. While the country has made significant progress in improving literacy over the years, it continues to be home to 313 million illiterate people; 59 percent of them are women.

The high rates of illiteracy among Indian women and the corollary gender gap in literacy attainment are attributable to many social, economic and cultural factors. Even as the benefits of female education are public including a more productive workforce, lower fertility and lower infant mortality the costs such as tuition fees and school supplies as well as opportunity costs of forgone child labour, are privately borne by households. This leads to underinvestment in women's schooling. Accentuating the disadvantage for women are the social restrictions on their mobility that prevent an educated woman from entering the labour force and offering support to her household. The educational gender gap, therefore, is not only a reflection of the low economic returns to female education but is also a symptom of the entrenched biases that discourage the aspirations of women and other marginalized communities.

Current literature is less clear about the correlation between household income and female education. One study of urban literacy and gender disparity across India, finds that "neither in terms of absolute levels of literacy nor distributive justice, i.e., reduction in gender and caste disparities, does per capita income have any statistically significant positive bearing upon literacy status of states." Similarly, another study observes that the importance of poverty as a cause of persistent illiteracy and widening gender gap has been inflated. Meanwhile, the World Bank highlights that the gender gap is affected more by social and cultural factors and less by absolute poverty. It recommends demand-linked measures to address the gender gap, such as awareness campaigns, childcare centres and the hiring of more female teachers. Similar policy prescriptions are echoed by the Draft National Education Policy 2019 which recommends setting up a Gender-Inclusion Fund to build the nation's capacity to provide quality and equitable education for all girls.

Most official reports focus on studying the adult literacy rate which measures literacy among individuals aged 15 years and above. However, a focus on just adult literacy is likely to underestimate the progress India has made in improving its literacy outcomes.

The adult literacy rate for both males and females increases at a relatively sluggish rate since most of the progress in literacy occurs through improvement in child and youth literacy. Therefore it is important to study the gender gap in literacy for different age cohorts to get a clear understanding of the literacy landscape in the country and identify the key challenges constraining a convergence between male and female literacy. It is the primary aim of this brief.

Education and literacy of women in India

Education is regarded as a key instrument for the empowerment of women. Education changes their worldview, improves their chances of employment, facilitates their participation in public life, and also influences their fertility. Several studies indicate that educated women have, on an average, fewer children and they take good care of their socialization.

Although considerable progress has been made with regard to literacy and education, the overall picture still remains unfavorable to women. At the beginning of the 20th century, the country as a whole was largely illiterate with just 5.3 per cent of the population counted as literate. Only 0.60 per cent women were then literate. In 1951, the first Census taken four years after independence, the picture was not much better.

The female literacy rate stood at 7.93 per cent, as compared to 24.95 per cent for men. The 2001 Census suggests a 65.38 per cent literacy rate for India, with 75.85 per cent for males, and 54.16 per cent for females. Literacy is not evenly spread throughout India. There are 12 states and 2 Union territories that are below the national average for female literacy.

The states of Bihar and Jharkhand have the lowest female literacy rates (33.57 and 39.38%, respectively). These data suggest that nearly half of India's female population is still illiterate. This is not a small number. A massive programme is needed to make nearly 240 million women literate.

It is also to be noted that most of these women are located in rural and tribal areas. Another point to remember is that most of the women included in the literate category have not had education beyond the primary level.

The number of women goes down as we move to higher levels of education. However, women are to be found in all professions, including medicine and engineering. An idea can, however, be had by knowing the percentage of females by number of years of schooling.

In this regard, the following programmes undertaken by the government deserve special mention:

1. Mahila Samakhya:

Started in 1989, this scheme uses education as a tool for empowerment. This scheme is being carried out in 8,000 villages in 53 districts in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh.

2. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan:

This is a campaign to universal primary education, as part of the international programme of Education for All (EFA). It is inspired by UNESCO's regional programme called APPEAL – Asia Pacific Programme of Education for All.

3. In addition, there are other programmes of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, which also cover women's education. These include Operation Blackboard, Non-Formal Education, District Primary Education Programme, National Literacy Mission, Navodaya Vidyalaya, and Vocational Education. In the state of Rajasthan, which has low rates of literacy among rural and tribal women, an innovative programme called Lok Jumbish was launched with financial assistance from the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) in 1992. This programme was, however, closed down in 2004.

Key findings

1. India in 2017 is far more literate than India in 1987.

India has successfully broken out of the “low literacy trap” in which the illiteracy of parents leads to poor literacy outcomes for the successive generation. Child and youth literacy numbers for both males and females show that sustained efforts to improve literacy have borne fruit over the years. The introduction of the Mid-Day-Meal Scheme (1995), for example, and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001), as well as the enactment of RTE (Right to Education Act, 2009) have contributed significantly to improving literacy. According to latest available data, child and youth literacy in India stands at 93 percent and 94 percent, respectively. If India is able to sustain this momentum, then the country might be able to achieve universal literacy for children and youth by 2030.

2. The gap between male and female literacy rates for children and youth has been shrinking steadily, signalling greater gender parity in literacy attainment.

The problems in female education are not confined to issues of increasing access, expanding coverage and improving quality. Rather, the biggest hurdle is to transform mindsets and convince parents to send their daughters to school. Indeed, programmes such as NPGEL (National Programme of Education for Girls at Elementary Level, 2003) have played an instrumental role in improving female literacy, alongside cash-incentive schemes such as *Dhanlakshmi* (2008), initiatives such as construction of toilets for girls (under the *Swachh Vidyalaya* Initiative) and campaigns such as ‘*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* (literally, Save the Daughters, Educate the Daughters)’. These interventions were designed to identify and overcome the various hurdles associated with the education of girls, and today, far more Indian girls are literate as compared to their mothers.

3. The illiteracy of older adults and the elderly is driving down the overall literacy numbers of India.

Child and youth literacy has always been high on the development agenda. However, illiteracy among older adults is also a pressing concern, as illiterate adults are more

susceptible to ill health, exploitation and human rights abuse. They are more likely to remain unemployed and earn lower wages.

The National Literacy Mission (NLM) launched in 1988 included adult education as one of its key components. It focused on imparting functional literacy to non-literates in the age group of 15-35 years. More recently, a new variant of the NLM called Saakshar Bharat (2009) was introduced to bolster adult education and skill development. Furthermore, as an auxiliary to the formal education system, night schools have been playing an important role in educating those adults who work during the day or those who have crossed the age of formal education. The education of older adults, therefore, has not been completely neglected by Indian policymakers, although it deserves more attention.

The progress that India has made in the realms of child and youth literacy often gets offset by its poor performance in the literacy of older adults. This is one of the reasons why India still ranks low in most of the global human capital indices.

To achieve universal literacy by 2030, literacy campaigns and initiatives should be integrated with non-formal education programmes for older adults. These initiatives need to be creatively designed so that India is able to nudge older adults towards becoming literate. Awareness campaigns must focus on breaking social stereotypes that prevent older adults and women in particular, from becoming literate. At the household level, as the younger generation becomes more educated than their elders, the onus of creating literate homes should shift from the older generation to children and youth.

4. The wide literacy gender gap for older adults and the elderly is masking the progress made with regards to the gender gap for children and youth.

Latest NSS data reveals that female literacy for the working-age population is 59 percent, 20 percentage points lower than the male literacy rate for the same group. While educating young girls will continue to be India's top priority, policymakers must keep in mind that educating and empowering mothers is just as important as "*beti padhao*".

Policy prescriptions

Over a span of three decades, the nature of the hurdles India has been facing with regard to literacy has changed. As new challenges have emerged, the country's goalposts have

shifted and so should its policies. Promoting literacy among older adults while paying special attention to gender parity are issues that can no longer take a backseat.

The solution seems simple: focus on making older adults literate. However, putting this idea into action is far more difficult than it may sound. There are multiple barriers that have to be overcome to ensure participation in adult literacy programmes—including institutional roadblocks (lack of night schools or high entry fees); situational hurdles (related to family); and dispositional as well (psychological factors that may impede an individual's decision to participate). The following paragraphs offer policy recommendations to tackle these barriers.

Embed skill training into adult literacy programmes

One of the biggest dispositional barriers preventing older adults from engaging in literacy programmes is that they see little utility and relevance for the same. However, if such programmes are linked to learning additional skills such as vocational training, then they are likely to solicit wider participation. Taking a cue from other countries, programmes can be designed that place literacy learning in the context of rights awareness, health and food security (such as in Zambia), reproductive health, community mobilization and communication (Gambia), and learning skills that support income-generating activities (Sierra Leone). In order to close the literacy gender gap for older adults, adult literacy programmes that also offer women training in skills such as bangle-making, block-painting, jute-work and other handcrafts should be designed to elicit greater participation. In India, the three states that need such programmes the most, especially for older adults are Arunachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Nagaland

Link literacy with employment schemes and offer additional incentives

Participation in adult education programmes should be linked to eligibility for the various employment schemes offered by the government. Additional incentives such as the provision of micro-credit facilities and grants to participants should also be offered.

Encourage community participation and volunteerism

The National Literacy Mission (1988) was based on a foundation of community engagement and volunteerism. Apart from imparting basic literacy and numeracy skills, the NLM also sparked off discussions and dialogue on relevant social issues such as women empowerment, domestic abuse and alcoholism. However, towards the end of the mission, the voluntary nature of the mission got diluted, and the mission lost efficacy. It is therefore crucial to mobilize volunteers and seek community participation for the success of any adult literacy campaign. As mentioned in the draft of the National Education Policy 2019, if every literate member of the community could commit to teaching one student/person how to read, it would change the country's landscape very quickly.

Conclusion

“Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope,” once said former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. “It is a tool for daily life in modern society. It is a bulwark against poverty and a building block of development, an essential complement to investments in roads, dams, clinics and factories.” More than two decades since Annan said these words, they still ring true. As India climbs the development ladder, literacy must occupy a high spot on the policy agenda since it not only has a high intrinsic value but is also a powerful force multiplier.

This study assessed the literacy landscape in India by analyzing the literacy gender gap for different age cohorts over a span of three decades. The findings of this study show that India has not only made substantial progress with regard to literacy but has also achieved greater gender parity in literacy attainment. India is on track to achieve universal literacy among children and youth by 2030. Moreover, there has been a convergence in the male and female literacy rates for children and a consequent closing of the literacy gender gap; there will likely be similar success for youth in the years to come. However, the third key finding of this study points out that growth in overall literacy numbers is likely to be tepid owing to the prevalence of widespread illiteracy among older adults and the elderly. Furthermore, the literacy gender gap for older adults

and the elderly is much wider than that for youth, thereby showing a lack of gender parity in their literacy attainment. The same patterns are seen at the state level.

As a nation, India must aim to conquer the hurdles posed by illiteracy, not only to preserve its economic vigor but also to ensure that every individual has a full range of opportunities for personal fulfillment and participation in society. For older adults and the elderly in particular, literacy plays an essential role in enabling them to remain in or rejoin the work force, to contribute to society through volunteerism and civic participation, and to live full, independent, and productive lives through their later years. As India develops into a 21st-century knowledge economy, the definition of literacy must evolve to reflect the changing needs of society. Literacy must no longer be confined to the basic, foundational skills of reading and writing but linked to the broader notions of financial, digital, civic and multicultural literacy. These evolving definitions of literacy must be integrated into the policy discourse to ensure economic progress and social advancement of both individuals and the society.

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