

**SOCIO-GEOGRAPHICAL PHENOMENA OF WOMEN'S LITERACY IN INDIA**

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Abstract

The Indian government has expressed a strong commitment towards education for all; however, India still has one of the lowest female literacy rates in Asia. In 1991, less than 40 percent of the 330 million women aged 7 and over were literate, which means today there are over 200 million illiterate women in India. This low level of literacy not only has a negative impact on women's lives but also on their families' lives and on their country's economic development. Numerous studies show that illiterate women have high levels of fertility and mortality, poor nutritional status, low earning potential, and little autonomy within the household. A woman's lack of education also has a negative impact on the health and well being of her children. For instance, a recent survey in India found that infant mortality was inversely related to mother's educational level. Additionally, the lack of an educated population can be an impediment to the country's economic development. The present research paper is focusing towards the same.

Key words : Constitution, Female Literacy, NFE, Democracy, NPE, NCFW, Autonomy, Women's Empowerment

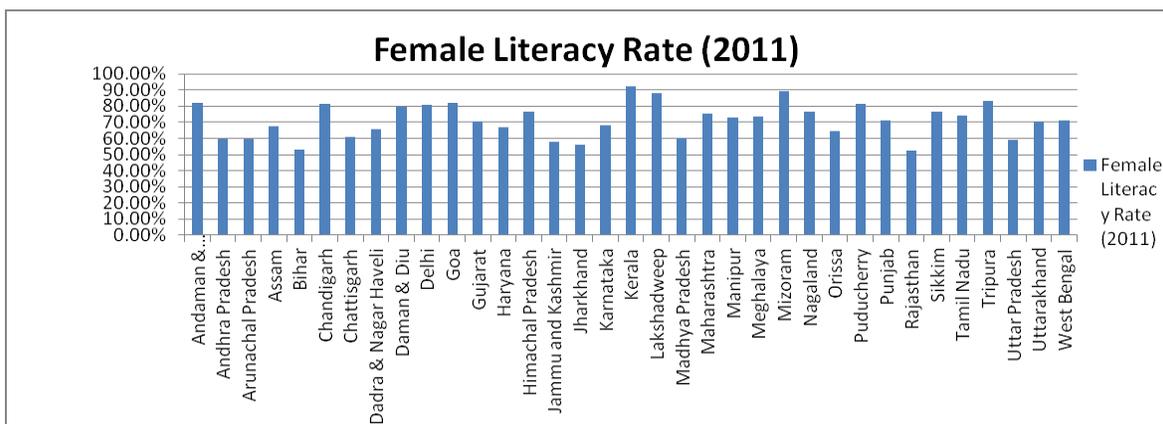
Introduction: The Indian government's commitment to education is stated in its constitution with an article promising "free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14" (The World Bank, 1997 b). The National Policy on Education, which was updated in 1992, and the 1992 Program of Action both reaffirmed the government's commitment to improving literacy levels, by providing special attention to girls and children from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

Literacy: Women have a much lower literacy rate than men. Far fewer girls are enrolled in the schools, and many of them drop out. Conservative cultural attitudes prevent some girls from

attending school. The number of literate women among the female population of India was between 2–6% from the British Raj onwards to the formation of the Republic of India in 1947. Concerted efforts led to improvement from 15.3% in 1961 to 28.5% in 1981. By 2001 literacy for women had exceeded 50% of the overall female population, though these statistics were still very low compared to world standards and even male literacy within India. Recently the Indian government has launched *Saakshar Bharat Mission for Female Literacy*. This mission aims to bring down female illiteracy by half of its present level.

Large Differences in Literacy among the States

The differences in literacy rates among the states are also extreme. Kerala has the highest female literacy rate, with over 86 percent of women literate in 1991 which rose to 92 percent in 2011. The state with the second highest female literacy is Mizoram, where nearly 89.40 percent of women are literate. On the other hand, there are several states that have literacy rates of less than 60 percent, including Bihar, Jharkhand, J&K, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.



Together Bihar and Uttar Pradesh states have over 73 million illiterate women. These literacy levels are highly correlated with the health status of the population. Kerala has the lowest infant mortality rates and the highest life expectancies of all the states. Conversely, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have some of the lowest life expectancies found in India (India Registrar General (IRG), 1996; IRG 1995). As with India as a whole, many states have large rural-urban differences in female literacy. In 6 of the 29 states, 25 percent or less of the women in rural areas is literate. In Rajasthan, less than 12 percent of rural women are literate.

India Has a Shortage of Female Teachers: Lack of female teachers is another potential barrier to girls’ education. Girls are more likely to attend school and have higher academic achievement

if they have female teachers. This is particularly true in highly gender-segregated societies such as India (Bellew and King, 1993; King, 1990). Currently, women account for only 29 percent of teachers at the primary level (MHRD, 1993). The proportion of teachers who are female is even lower at the university level, 22 percent of instructors (CSO, 1992). These proportions reflect the historic paucity of women with the educational qualifications to be teachers. However, the proportions are likely to change in the future as women currently account for nearly half of those being trained as teachers. Again there are differences among the states; the states with the highest literacy rates are also the states with the highest proportion of female teachers.

Sita Anantha Raman outlines the progress of Women's Education in India: Since 1947 the Indian government has tried to provide incentives for girls' school attendance through programs for midday meals, free books, and uniforms. This welfare thrust raised primary enrolment between 1951 and 1981. In 1986 the National Policy on Education decided to restructure education in tune with the social framework of each state, and with larger national goals. It emphasized that education was necessary for democracy, and central to the improvement of women's condition. The new policy aimed at social change through revised texts, curricula, increased funding for schools, expansion in the numbers of schools, and policy improvements. Emphasis was placed on expanding girls' occupational centres and primary education; secondary and higher education; and rural and urban institutions. The report tried to connect problems like low school attendance with poverty, and the dependence on girls for housework and sibling day care. The National Literacy Mission also worked through female tutors in villages. Although the minimum marriage age is now eighteen for girls, many continue to be married much earlier. Therefore, at the secondary level, female dropout rates are high. Sita Anantha Raman also maintains that while the educated Indian women workforce maintains professionalism, the men outnumber them in most fields and, in some cases, receive higher income for the same positions.

The education of women in India plays a significant role in improving living standards in the country. A higher women literacy rate improves the quality of life both at home and outside of home, by encouraging and promoting education of children, especially female children, and in reducing the infant mortality rate. Several studies have shown that a lower level of women literacy rates results in higher levels of fertility and infant mortality, poorer nutrition, lower earning potential and the lack of an ability to make decisions within a household. Women's lower educational level is also shown to adversely affect the health and living conditions of

children. A survey that was conducted in India showed results which support the fact that infant mortality rate was inversely related to female literacy rate and educational level. The survey also suggests a correlation between education and economic growth.

In India, it was found that there is a large disparity between female literacy rates in different states. For example, while Kerala actually has a female literacy rate of about 86 percent, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have female literacy rates around 55-60 percent. These values are further correlated with health levels of the Indians, where it was found that Kerala was the state with the lowest infant mortality rate while Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are the states with the lowest life expectancies in India. Furthermore, the disparity of female literacy rates across rural and urban areas is also significant in India. Out of the 24 states in India, 6 of them have female literacy rates of below 60 percent. The rural state Rajasthan has a female literacy rate of less than 12 percent.

Education: Though it is gradually rising, the female literacy rate in India is lower than the male literacy rate. Compared to boys, far fewer girls are enrolled in the schools, and many of them drop out. According to the National Sample Survey Data of 1997, only the states of Kerala and Mizoram have approached universal female literacy rates. According to majority of the scholars, the major factor behind the improved social and economic status of women in Kerala is literacy.

Under Non-Formal Education programme (NFE), about 40% of the centres in states and 10% of the centres in UTs are exclusively reserved for females. As of 2000, about 0.3 million NFE centres were catering to about 7.42 million children, out of which about 0.12 million were exclusively for girls. In urban India, girls are nearly at par with the boys in terms of education. However, in rural India girls continue to be less educated than the boys.

According to a 1998 report by U.S. Department of Commerce, the chief barrier to female education in India are inadequate school facilities (such as sanitary facilities), shortage of female teachers and gender bias in curriculum (majority of the female characters being depicted as weak and helpless).

Workforce Participation



Contrary to the common perception, a large percent of women in India work. The National data collection agencies accept the fact that there is a serious under-estimation of women's contribution as workers. However, there are far fewer women in the paid workforce than there are men. In urban India Women have impressive number in the workforce? As an example at software industry 30% of the workforce is female. They are at par with their male counterparts in terms of wages, position at the work place.

In rural India, agriculture and allied industrial sectors employ as much as 89.5% of the total female labour. In overall farm production, women's average contribution is estimated at 55% to 66% of the total labour. According to a 1991 World Bank report, women accounted for 94% of total employment in dairy production in India. Women constitute 51% of the total employed in forest-based small-scale enterprises.

One of the most famous female business success stories is the Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad. In 2006, Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, who started Biocon - one of India's first biotech companies, was rated India's richest woman. Lalita D. Gupte and Kalpana Morparia were the only businesswomen in India who made the list of the Forbes World's Most Powerful Women in 2006. Gupte ran India's second-largest bank, ICICI Bank, until October 2006, and Morparia is the CEO of JPMorgan India.

Notable Indian women:

Education: Savitribai Phule was a social reformer who along with her husband; Mahatma Jotiba Phule played an important role in improving women's rights in India during the British Rule. Savitribai was the first female teacher of the first women's school in India and also considered as the pioneer of modern Marathi poetry. In 1852 she opened a school for Untouchable girls.

Literature : Many well-known women writers are in Indian literature as poets and story writers. Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Surayya, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai are some of them. Sarojini Naidu is called the nightingale of India. Arundhati Roy was awarded the Booker Prize (Man Booker Prize) for her novel 'The God of Small Things'.

Barriers to Education : There are several reasons for the low levels of literacy in India, not the least of which is the high level of poverty. Over one-third of the population is estimated to be living below the poverty line (The World Bank, 1997a). Although school attendance is free, the costs of books, uniforms, and transportation to school can be too much for poor families. Poor families are also more likely to keep girls at home to care for younger siblings or to work in family enterprises. If a family has to choose between educating son or a daughter because of financial restrictions, typically the son will be chosen. Negative parental attitudes toward educating daughters can also be a barrier to a girl's education. Many parents view educating sons as an investment because the sons will be responsible for caring for aging parents. On the other hand, parents may see the education because daughters will eventually live with their husbands' families, and the parents will not benefit directly from their education. Also, daughters with higher levels of education will likely have higher dowry expenses as they will want a comparably educated husband. However, education sometimes lowers the dowry for a girl because it is viewed as an asset by the husband's family.

Policies and Future Prospect: The central government of India formulated the [National Policy on Education](#) (NPE) in 1968 and in 1986 and also reinforced the Programme of Action (POA) in 1992. In 2008 the government initiated several measures the launching of DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) and SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan), (India's initiative for Education for All) and setting up of [Navodaya Vidyalaya](#) and other selective schools in every district, advances in [female education](#), inter-disciplinary research and establishment of open universities. Gender Equity and Women's Empowerment is one of the great strengths of the adult education programme in which there has been the more involvement of women. As much as 60% of participants in India are female. Programmes have provided illiterate adult women who have been denied access to formal schooling with great opportunity for reading, writing, increasing awareness levels and skills training. Literacy and adult education campaigns have actively promoted gender equity and have sought to empower them as to decision-making about themselves, their families and their communities. India recorded heightened social awareness regarding the importance of education both for themselves as well as for their children. The biggest achievement of the adult education movement has been its impact on girls' education. The confidence of the girls as they perform their scholastic and extra-curricular roles is the result of the awareness among neo-literate parents that girls need to be educated and outgoing. The

need to provide equal opportunity to both girls and boys has also had the effect of generating greater demand for the quantity and quality of primary schooling. India's NPE also contains the National System of Education, which ensures some uniformity while taking into account regional education needs. The NPE also stresses on higher spending on education, envisaging a budget of more than 6% of the Gross Domestic Product. While the need for wider reform in the primary and secondary sectors is recognized as an issue, the emphasis is also on the development of science and technology education infrastructure.

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