

A Study Of Gender Gap In Literacy – The Case In West Bengal

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to draw attention to the issue of gender and education with a special focus on the situation of the districts of West Bengal. Literacy rate is one of the indicators of educational attainment. Using data on literacy rate, the study highlights the gap in male and female education across all the districts of West Bengal.

Key words: literacy, literacy rate, gender

Data:

For the purpose of analysis, available secondary data has been used. Data from Census 1991 and 2001 have been used to study the gender gap in literacy rates in the districts of West Bengal.

Analysis:

Certain highlights :

- According to the 2001 Census, literacy rate in the State of West Bengal has increased from 57.7% (1991) to 69.22%. Male literacy rate was 77.58% and Female literacy rate was 60.2% in 2001. The decadal increase in overall literacy rate was 11.52%.
- Mass Literacy programme has been implemented in the state. The programme had three stages – Total Literacy Campaign [TLC], Post Literacy Programme [PLM] and Continuing Education Programme [CEP].
- Seven districts – Burdwan, Birbhum, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Midnapur, Bankura and Hooghly – have implemented the CEP. Six districts – Howrah, Purulia, Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri – are under PLP.
- After evaluation of the TLC and PLP it has been estimated that a total number of 92.36 lakhs non-literates have achieved literacy.
- At the end of September 2000, there were 52426 primary schools. Given the high cost of expanding formal education, the State government had introduced an alternative elementary education system with the nomenclature of Shishu Shiksha Karmasuchi. Under this programme, Shishu Shiksha Kendras i.e. child

education centres are set up wherever there are atleast 20 children not having access to any primary schools.

The responsibility of this programme was handled by Pashchim Banga Rajya Shishu Shiksha Mission.

- The District Primary Education Programme [DPEP] was launched in 1997-98 [DPEP Phase III] with the objective of accelerating the process of universalisation of elementary education with improvement in capacity, access, enrolment and retention with special emphasis on better quality of education.
- In order to achieve universalisation of elementary education as quickly as possible, the State government apart from strengthening the formal education system and implementing mass literacy programme, has also introduced a number of innovative schemes to accelerate growth of literacy in the state.
- Sarba Shiksha Abhijan [SSA] is a national programme of Universalisation of Elementary Education [UEE] which aims at providing useful and relevant education up to Class VIII for all children in the age group 5 to 14 years by 2010 and bridge all social, regional and gender gaps with the participation of the community.

Various campaigns and programmes have been undertaken by the state to improve educational standard and status in general, but the fact remains that female literacy level falls far behind male literacy level. Educational decisions are radically different for boys and girls. In the case of male education, there are strong economic incentives because improved education enhances employment prospects and parents have a strong stake in the economic advancement of their sons. Economic returns and parental self-interest, on the other hand, provide very weak incentives for female education, given the prevailing gender division of labour, marriage practices and property rights. This contrast has strong implication for public policy. In the case of female education it is particularly important to address the conservation of social attitudes and parental inertia. The value attached to female education in India has changed substantially over a relatively short period of time under the impact of economic change, public action and social movements. The non-government organisations have played an important role in this respect. To cite an example, we can take note of the Nari Bikash Sangha [NBS], a rural women's organisation in Bankura, West Bengal, which runs creches in villages and trains children of working mothers in Bengali alphabet and some simple arithmetic. The crèche mothers are expected to ensure that the children go on to primary school. The role played by such NGOs has really made a difference to the lives of girl children in the State.

The case in West Bengal

A World Bank Report [World Bank 1997, Primary Education in India] placed West Bengal as one of the problem states along with Andhra Pradesh and the four BIMARU states. The report expressed concern over the fact that the number of children not attending school [either due to non-enrolment or by the reason of drop-out] is alarmingly high in West Bengal.

A study conducted by the IIM, Kolkata in 1995-98, brought out many deficiencies in the management of primary education in West Bengal in terms of non-enrolment of children, poor infrastructure, low teacher/school ratio, absence of monitoring, etc.

A study by Pratichi Trust on the delivery of primary education also highlighted various disquieting features of the state's primary schools. The report particularly drew attention to such aspects as the accountability, motivation and orientation of teachers, so that a congenial learning situation can be created in the schools, particularly for those children who come from the neglected sections of the society.

The School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, conducted a survey for a project entitled 'Girl child and the Family'. Four villages and two wards from West Bengal were selected for the survey. A study by Sengupta and Guha, based on the above data, attempted to identify certain demand side determinants of girls' schooling in selected rural and urban areas of West Bengal. From the study, it was clear that household endowments [characterised by parental schooling, income and occupation] had the strongest impact on girls' schooling opportunities and attainments. It was observed that low income is a primary reason for low enrolment, high drop-out and low grade attainment. Another strong deterring factor to school participation was the expenditure involved in sending children to school.

Indicators of status of education

For understanding the status of education, we can look into several sets of data that are currently available in the education sector. The database collected by the NSSO and Census in India is authentic, being collected directly from individual households. The All India Education surveys conducted by the NCERT also compile State-wise educational data on school age population. The respective State governments, through the Department of Education, also compile data on school age children annually. All such data can be used to measure the relationship between education and the gender gap.

Some of the major educational indices are:

- (a) Literacy Rate
- (b) Drop - out Rate
- (c) Attendance and Enrolment Rates

In this study we consider literacy rate as the indicator on the basis of which we look at the gender gap in literacy.

Literacy Rate

This is generally accepted as one of the basic indicators of progress of the population. The educational level of a population is one of the most important determinants of its quality. Literacy Rate is defined as the ratio of literate persons to all persons aged 7 years and above.

In a vast country like India, the literacy rate, as well as educational level, exhibit wide variation by different socio-economic categories like region, gender, social group, etc. The Government of India has been making planned efforts from time to time to raise literacy levels through various schemes of Universal School Education, adult education, non-formal education, skill development schemes, literacy mission campaigns, etc.

Data on literacy and educational levels of the population are collected as a part of the demographic particulars of the household members in most of the survey rounds of the National Sample Survey Organisation [NSSO]. In the 42nd Round [July 1986 – June 1987] a comprehensive study was carried out by the NSSO to study the extent of participation of children and youth in the formal and non-formal educational systems including drop-outs at various levels. Subsequently a survey on literacy was taken up during July 1991 – December 1991 during which a schedule was planned for ascertaining literacy status of persons. Further during the 52nd Round [July 1995 – June 1996] of the NSSO, information on participation in education was collected.

There are other important sources of literacy and educational statistics in India which include the Census of India, statistics compiled by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, District Level Literacy Surveys under the National Literacy Mission and the surveys and reports of the National Council for Educational Research and Training.

We tabulate the literacy rates of the different districts West Bengal in 1991 and 2001 in Table I and Tables II and III record the male and female literacy rates across the same districts in 1991 and 2001 respectively.

Table I: Educational status of West Bengal districts- by Literacy Rate

	1991	2001
West Bengal	57.7	69.22
Cooch Behar	45.78	67.21
Jalpaiguri	45.09	63.62
Darjeeling	57.95	72.87
Uttar Dinajpur	34.58	49.63
Dakshin Dinajpur	46.4	64.46
Malda	35.62	50.71
Murshidabad	38.28	55.05
Nadia	52.53	66.55
24 Parganas [N]	66.81	78.49
24 Parganas [S]	55.1	70.16
Kolkata	77.61	81.31
Howrah	67.62	77.64
Hooghly	66.78	75.59
Midnapur	69.32	75.17
Bankura	52.04	63.84
Purulia	43.29	56.14
Burdwan	61.88	71
Birbhum	48.56	62.16

Source: Census 1991 and 2001

Table II: Comparison of Male and Female Literacy rates in 1991 in the districts of West Bengal

District	Males	Females
West Bengal	67.81	46.56
Cooch Behar	57.35	33.31
Jalpaiguri	56	33.2
Darjeeling	67.07	47.84
Uttar Dinajpur	45.21	22.85
Dakshin Dinajpur	56.75	35.33
Malda	45.61	24.92
Murshidabad	46.42	29.57
Nadia	60.05	44.42
24 Parganas [N]	74.72	57.99
24 Parganas [S]	68.45	40.57
Kolkata	81.94	72.09
Howrah	76.11	57.83
Hooghly	75.77	56.9
Midnapur	81.27	56.63
Bankura	66.75	36.55
Purulia	62.17	23.24
Burdwan	71.12	51.46
Birbhum	59.26	37.17

Source: Census 1991

Table III: Comparison of Male and Female Literacy rates in 2001 in the districts of West Bengal

District	Males	Females
West Bengal	77.58	60.22
Cooch Behar	76.83	57.04
Jalpaiguri	73.64	52.9
Darjeeling	81.28	63.92
Uttar Dinajpur	59.27	37.16
Dakshin Dinajpur	73.3	55.12
Malda	59.24	41.67
Murshidabad	61.4	48.33
Nadia	72.67	60.06
24 Parganas [N]	84.35	72.13
24 Parganas [S]	79.89	59.73
Kolkata	84.07	77.95
Howrah	83.68	70.93
Hooghly	83.05	67.72
Midnapur	85.25	64.63
Bankura	77.21	49.8
Purulia	74.18	37.15
Burdwan	79.3	61.93
Birbhum	71.57	52.15

Source: Census 2001

According to the 2001 Census, the state had a total population of 80,221,171 [41,487,694 males and 38,733,477 females]. The sex ratio was 934 females per 100 males as against 917 in 1991. The overall literacy rate was 69.22; for males it was 77.58 and for females it was 60.22. The disparity is more evident in the case of urban and rural areas. For urban areas, the number of literate males was 18,480,653 and that of literate females was 12,774,380. The literacy position of rural women is quite low. Of all the districts of West Bengal, the highest literacy rate was 81.31 in Kolkata and lowest was 49.63 in Uttar Dinajpur. Female literacy rate was highest in Kolkata [77.95] and lowest in Purulia [37.15].

The literacy rate for West Bengal on the whole and for all districts increased from 1991 to 2001. Individually, for males and females also there was a noticeable increase in the literacy rate over this decade. However, on comparing the female literacy rate with the male literacy rate in the same Census years, we find a distinct lower rate for females in each district of West Bengal, thus showing a gender gap in literacy, so far as literacy rate is concerned. Both the tables II and III reflect this gender gap in education for West Bengal as a whole and each of its districts. In 1991, the male and female literacy rates were 67.81 and 46.56 respectively and in 2001 they were 77.58 and 60.22. Though there has been a definite increase in both male and female literacy rates, yet the latter is distinctly lower and the gap still persists. But the gap between the male and female literacy rates has gone down within this period [from 21.25 to 17.36] This can be linked to the increasing importance that has been given to female education as an empowerment measure.

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