

Women's Education in India

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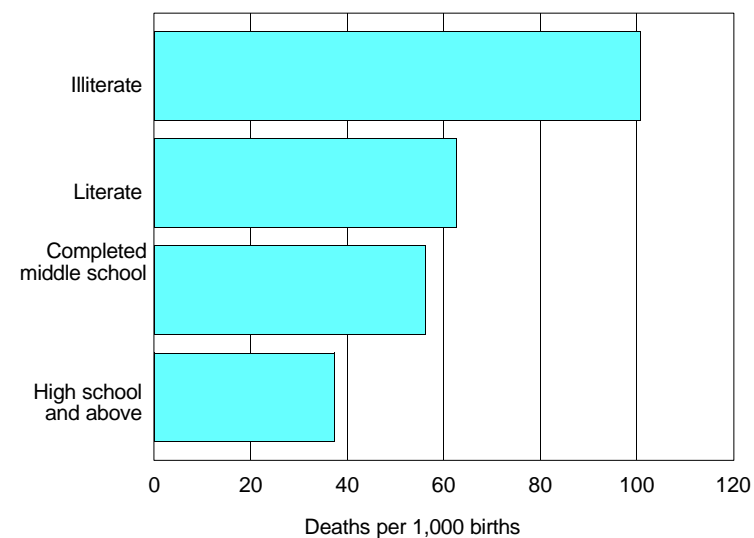
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Issued October 1998

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 (Figure 1). Additionally, the lack of an educated population can be an impediment to the country's economic development.

The Indian government's commitment to education is stated in its

Figure 1.
Infant Mortality Rates, by Mother's Educational Level: 1992-93



Source: International Institute for Population Sciences, 1995

constitution with an article promising "free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14" (The World Bank, 1997b). 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 Levels Improving Over Time

Although literacy levels are low, there has been progress in improving educational attainment for

both sexes in India over the last several decades. In 1971, only 22 percent of women and 46 percent of men were literate (Figure 2) (Register General and Census Commissioner (RGCC), 1977).¹ By 1991, 39 percent of women and 64 percent of men were literate (RGCC, 1993).² Thus, there has been a large increase in the proportion of women who are literate in just 20 years. Despite the improvements in literacy, there continues to be a large gap between the literacy levels of men and of women. For India as a

¹ These rates refer to the population aged 5 and over.

² These rates refer to the population aged 7 and over.



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whole, the gender gap in literacy has been decreasing since 1981; in some states, however the disparity in literacy between the sexes has been growing.

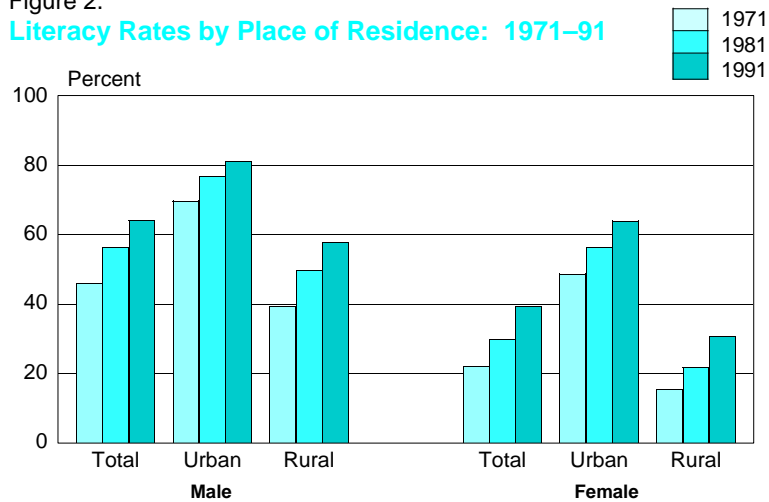
There are dramatic differences in literacy rates by place of residence, with rates in rural areas lagging behind rates in urban areas. In 1991, the urban female literacy rate was more than twice that of the rural rate, 64 and 31 percent, respectively (RGCC, 1993). While there have, however, been substantial increases in literacy rates in both urban and rural areas, the gap between the two sectors has not narrowed appreciably (Figure 2).

Large Differences in Literacy Among the States

The differences in literacy rates among the states are also extreme (Figure 3). Kerala has the highest female literacy rate, with over 86 percent of women literate in 1991. The state with the second highest female literacy is Mizoram, where nearly 79 percent of women are literate. On the other hand, there are several states that have literacy rates of less than 30 percent, including Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the two most populous states. Together these two states have over 63 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 24 states, 25 percent or less of the women in rural areas are literate. In Rajasthan, less than 12 percent of rural women are literate.

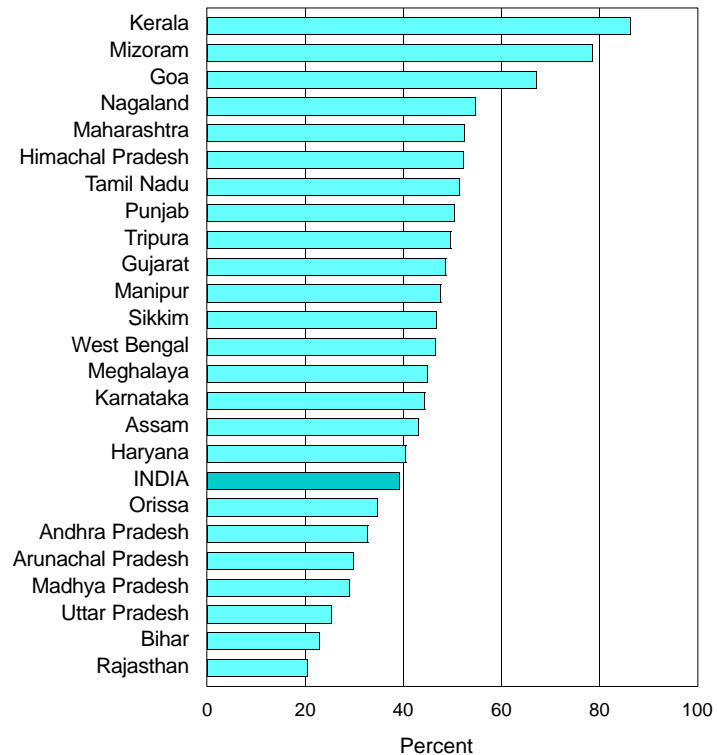
Figure 2.
Literacy Rates by Place of Residence: 1971–91



Rates are for the population aged 5 and over for 1971 and 7 and older for 1981 and 1991.

Source: Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 1977 and 1993

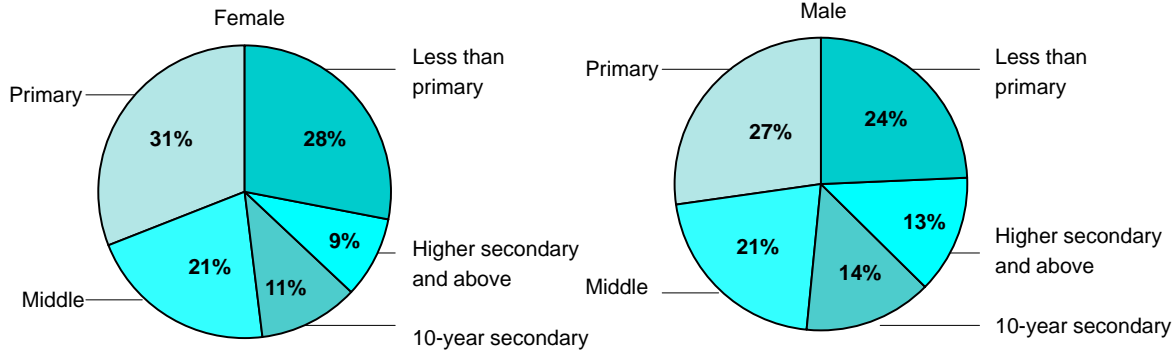
Figure 3.
Female Literacy Rates, by State: 1991



Rates are for the population aged 7 and older.

Source: Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 1993

Figure 4.
Educational Attainment of the Literate Population: 1991



Primary is 5 years of completed schooling, middle is 8 years, 10-year secondary is 10 years, and higher secondary and above is 12 years or more.

Source: Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 1993

Three Out of Five Girls Attend School Versus Three Out of Four Boys

Although literacy rates in India are low, there has been a concerted effort to encourage girls to attend school, which should lead to higher literacy rates in the future. In 1992-93, 75 percent of boys and 61 percent of girls aged 6 to 10 years were attending school. As with literacy measures, there are large differences in school attendance by state. In six states, over 85 percent of girls aged 6 to 14 were attending school. Not surprisingly, these states also had female literacy rates that were above the national average. In all states except Bihar, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, more than half of the girls aged 6 to 14 were attending school. Although Bihar has the lowest enrollment for both boys and girls, there was still a large gender gap, with only 38 percent of the girls attending school compared to 64 percent of the boys (International Institute for Population Science (IIPS), 1995).

A major educational problem facing both boys and girls in India is that although they may be enrolled at the beginning of the year they don't always remain in school. It is

estimated that 45 percent of girls and 41 percent of boys drop out of school between grades 1 and 5 (The World Bank, 1997b). Girls are often taken out of school to help with family responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings. Girls are also likely to be taken out of school when they reach puberty as a way of protecting their honor. The data on school attendance by age while for boys it remains stable. In 1992-93, only 55 percent of girls aged 11 to 14 were attending school compared with 61 percent of the younger age group (IIPS, 1995).

Beyond Literacy

Although there are numerous studies demonstrating a link between education and a variety of demographic indicators (i.e., fertility, infant and child mortality and morbidity), more recent studies are finding that there is a minimum threshold of education (more than 5 or 6 years) that must be achieved before there are significant improvements in female autonomy³, particularly in a

³ Autonomy is defined as decision making power within the home, economic and social self-reliance, confidence in interacting with the outside world (Jejeebhoy, 1995).

highly gender-stratified society such as India (Jeffery and Basu, 1996; Jejeebhoy, 1995). Of the literate women in India, 59 percent have only a primary education or less (Figure 4). This level of education may not be sufficient to meaningfully improve the status of these women. Only 41 percent of the literate population, or 13 percent of all Indian women, have more than a primary education.

Gender Gaps in University Education

Currently, a very small proportion of both men and women have a college education, just over 3 percent of men and 1 percent of women. Although a very small proportion of the Indian population attends college, women account for a third of the students at this level (Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), 1993). This sex ratio is found for most fields of study except: 1) engineering and commerce, where women account for a much smaller proportion of the students; and 2) education, where women account for nearly half of all students.

Alternative Education

The Non-formal Education (NFE) program was created by the Indian Government in 1979-80 to reach

children that were not in the formal education system, particularly girls and working children. Classes are held at times that are convenient for the students, and the curriculum is adapted to their needs. The teacher is a local person who has been trained to run the NFE center and the classes are held either in the teacher's home or after hours in already-existing schools. In 1994, there were 255,000 centers serving 6.4 million children.

Approximately 40 percent of the centers are exclusively for girls (The World Bank, 1997b). While the NFE program has the potential to solve many of the problems with access to education, as with any type of education program, the quality varies from location to location (Rugh, 1994).

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 a 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 of daughters as a waste of money

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.

Inadequate School Facilities

Another barrier to education in India is the lack of adequate school facilities. Many states simply do not have enough classrooms to accommodate all of the school-age children. Furthermore, the classrooms that are available often lack basic necessities such as sanitary facilities or water. In Uttar Pradesh, a recent survey found that 54 percent of schools did not have a water supply and 80 percent did not have latrines (The World Bank, 1997b). Lack of latrines can be particularly detrimental to girls' school attendance.

In some states, the inadequate supply of classrooms is further compounded by the large increase in the number of school-age children due to high population growth rates. For instance, in 1993, Uttar Pradesh needed to build 284,000 additional classrooms to achieve full enrollment of children age 6 to 10 (The World Bank, 1997b). The need for new classrooms will persist as the population continues to grow. On the other hand, in states where population growth rates are low (e.g., Kerala), the number of primary-age children is beginning to decline and state governments can focus on improving the quality of education rather than increasing the supply of classrooms.

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.

Gender Bias in Curriculum Still Exists

As long ago as 1965, the Indian government agreed to rewrite textbooks so that men and women would not be portrayed in gender-stereotyped roles. However, a study of Indian textbooks done in the 1980s found that men were the main characters in the majority of lessons. In these lessons, men held high-prestige occupations and were portrayed as strong, adventurous, and intelligent. In contrast, when women were included they were depicted as weak and helpless, often as the victims of abuse and beatings (Kalia, 1988). These depictions are strong barriers for improving women's position in society.

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