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Caste and Gender Disparities in Literacy in Urban India: Some Developmental Implications[1]

IN contemporary India, one of the major concerns in the development process is growth with equity, i.e., the concern that the benefits of development are distributed evenly in geographical terms so that there are no marked disparities across regions. The inter-regional parities may, however, be superfluous if disparities between various social groups and between gender within the groups are not simultaneously reduced. The entire question of distributive social justice thus hinges upon this crucial link between growth and equity. These two are not necessarily antagonistic to one another (Raza and Aggarwal 1984).

Literacy is an important component, both as an input in and an outcome of development process and enters as a basal stratum in the multilevel superstructure of subsequent educational attainment. An enquiry into its spatial pattern, inter-regional variation and disparities within and between groups thus assumes wider implication for further probe into the realisation of 'growth with equity' model. It has been argued that despite planned and concentrated efforts, the regional disparities in literacy have a remarkable temporal stability. However, these disparities should be seen as part of wider regional imbalances and spatial distortions consequent upon India's historical past and the colonial legacy.

Perhaps the most unjust inequalities in literacy are those which exist between non-scheduled and scheduled castes population as a result of socially enforced deprivation of the latter group. Within these two segments of population, females have invariably lower literacy rates compared to the males. These disparities are further influenced by rural and urban contexts, i.e., the urban literacy rates are higher than the rural literacy rates. A more developed regional setting has its own bearing upon decline or accentuation of such disparities. Thus, in India various aspects of deprivation in literacy intertwine intrinsically to create the final scenario.

The Present Study

Based on 1981 and 1991 census data, this paper attempts to examine different aspects of inequalities in literacy that exist between male/female and non-scheduled and scheduled

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1. This is an updated and revised version of the paper which appeared in Economic a/id Political Weekly, (23 October, 1988): WS 57-64.

2. The long standing patterns of literacy are not unique to India alone. Cipolla points out similar cases of temporal stability in the disparate levels of education in France and Italy where the underlying causes for the same can be traced back to their historical past (Cipolla 1969: 18).

caste segments of population in class I cities of India, i.e., urban settlements with population more than 1,00,000. The gender relation within these caste groups is also explored.

In India, region-specific context has always been seen as vital transcending the rural/urban dichotomy in quite a few variables (Sopher 1980). The cities have been selected for this study because literacy is primarily viewed as an urban attribute and it may be assumed that in terms of literacy rates, the cities would have a relatively homogeneous surface and a distinct urban ambience largely independent of regional constraints. Further, the gender and caste biases may be assumed to be minimal among cities (Kundu andRao 1986:446-9). If that were so, the relative deprivation of females and scheduled castes in general would have little spatial variation. The basis for this contention, of course, is an expectation that the level of services, motivation and stimulation for the diffusion of literacy are more or less uniformly available in large urban centres.

The detailed analysis follows, but it is intriguing to note that instead of a pan-Indian comparable social surface, the pattern of regional differences in literacy among cities follows that for the non-city and total population of the regions in which they are situated.[4]

The vitality of regional context coupled with temporal stability in literacy pattern across the Indian space makes it difficult to establish any systematic link between development and variation in literacy (Tilak 1978). The problem becomes further compounded by the fact that measures of development are always somewhat arbitrary and the question of circularity of argument remains. However, urbanisation with associated modernisation has brought about reduction in gender disparities in all segments of Indian population, although a similar trend is not observed in case of caste disparities that continue to exist (Kundu 1986; Raza and Aggarwal 1984: 27). There is no unilateral relationship observed in this regard though.

Much of the regional variation can be explained in terms of carry-over impact of region-specific social movements directed either towards betterment of scheduled castes or females depending upon the ideology adopted. That is to say, any visible break-through in the temporally stable literacy pattern seems to have an unmistakable imprint of specific social movements from country's historical past. A discussion of these movements, therefore, follows.

Background Information

Table 1 provides an overview of literacy data for different segments of population over a period of past four decades. Everywhere male literacy is higher than female literacy. Similarly, non-scheduled caste females have higher literacy rates as compared to scheduled caste females. Thus, according to 1991 census the female literacy for India is 32.4 per cent compared to 52.6

3. For 1981, the literates are counted in the age-group 5 and above. The 1991 census has deviated from the earlier censuses in the computation of literacy data in that it has taken into account literates in the age group 7 and above as a proportion of population. It is not possible to adjust the 1981 data for cities as per 1991 criterion because the age-specific literacy data are not available for cities. However, the analysis of state level literacy rates in this paper is based on comparable data for 1981 and 1991 as provided in the Paper 1 of 1991 census.

4. When the levels of literacy in class I cities are correlated with the levels of literacy in non-city urban population of respective districts, the two levels exhibit a highly significant coefficient of correlation. Though no causal relationship is envisaged, the existence of a common geographic pattern of variance is implified despite of differences in absolute sense. However, within the cities, there is a consistent, although irregular, positive bearing of city size on literacy. This observation is in keeping with other research findings. Kundu and Rao (1986:446), for example, note the impact of metropolisarion on literacy disparities among males and females. Also see Sopher (1980:133-41).

per cent for males whereas the urban female literacy rate is 54.0 per cent and the male literacy rate is 68.7 per cent. The information for the scheduled and the non-scheduled population is not yet available for 1991. In 1981, the literacy figures for scheduled castes were 10.9 per cent for females and 31.1 per cent for males in rural areas; in urban areas, the corresponding figures were 24.3 and 47.5 per cent respectively. For cities, the respective frequency distributions of these rates provide an overview of the situation quite aptly (Fig. 1).

TABLE 1: LITERACY PROFILE AND DISPARITIES 1961-1991

Population	*Literacy*				*Disparity*			
	1961	*1971*	*1981*	*1991*	*1961*	*1971*	*1981*	*1991*
Total	24.03	29.45	36.12	42.90				
Male	34.45	39.45	46.72	52.63				
Female	12.95	18.70	24.81	32.41	0.48	0.38	0.33	0.27
Rural	19.00	23.74	29.57	36.36				
Male	29.07	33.76	40.62	46.92				
Female	8.55	13.17	17.99	25.13	0.58	0.46	0.41	0.33
Urban	46.97	52.44	57.19	61.78				
Male	57.50	61.28	65.58	68.71				
Female	34.51	42.14	47.16	54.01	0.29	0.22	0.19	0.15
Urban non-								
scheduled castes	49.38	54.72	59.88	na				
Male	59.86	63.40	67.88	na				
Female	36.91	44.59	50.64	na	0.28	0.21	0.18	na
Urban scheduled								
Caste	21.78	28.65	36.60	na				
Male	32.16	39.93	47.54	na				
Female	10.02	16.69	24.34	na	0.56	0.42	0.35	na
City	51.16	56.47	62.26	65.08				
Male	60.27	64.15	69.26	70.99				
Female	38.61	47.21	54.10	58.38	0.26	0.18	0.15	0.13

SOURCE : Computed on the basis of data in Census of India 1961, Part H-A(ii), 1971 Part H-A (ii) and II-C (ii) and 1981 Part II-B (i and ii), Paper 1 and 2 of 1991.

A rise in the levels of literacy reduces gender disparities in general.[5] Such a reduction

5. Disparity between two groups, of which different proportions possess a particular property (in this case urban literacy) is here measured by Sopher's disparity index (1980) as modified by Kundu (1986). The two formulae are as follows:-

$$DIS = \log X_2/X_1 + \log (100 - Xi)/(100 - X_2)$$

$$DIK = \log X_2/X_1 + \log (200 - Xi)/(200 - X_2)$$

For a detailed discussion on how disparity index is a better statistical tool see Sopher (1980), especially footnote 87. Also, Kundu (1986).

Non-scheduled caste/scheduled caste disparity is calculated by convening the literacy rates of both the groups and also male and female components within the groups into logits and subtracting the scheduled caste values from the non-scheduled caste values; subtracting the values for female literacy from the values for male literacy yields the male/female disparity in urban literacy. The Presumption is that the behaviour of the non-scheduled caste and the males, as the case may be, is more representative of a normal situation than the behaviour of the scheduled caste and the females. Therefore, the fifst group is taken first in the disparity pair.

is maximum in cities.[6] In 1981, the sex disparity in literacy was 0.41 in rural areas as compared to 0.19 in urban areas. The corresponding figures for 1991 are 0.33 and 0.15. There has, however, been no corresponding lowering of the disparity in literacy between non-scheduled and scheduled castes, the indices being 0.35 and 0.27 for urban and rural areas respectively.

Both the gender and the caste disparities vary widely across India. However, as compared to males, inter-city variations are greater for female literates in general as well as for non-scheduled and scheduled castes population. The situation does not change across various size-classes of cities. However, the metropolitan context appears to have a relatively more homogeneous distribution of female literates (Table 2 and part of Table 4).

A noteworthy feature is that the highest and lowest values for literacy among males/females and non-scheduled/scheduled castes are found in just four cities along with their locations in south and north India, i.e., Kerala and Uttar Pradesh respectively (Table 2). Incidentally, the same two states accounted for the highest and lowest values for literacy in cities in 1961 and 1971 also (Sahoo 1987).

TABLE 2 : COEFFICIENT OF VARIATION AND MALE/FEMALE LITERACY IN CLASS I CniES, 1981-1991

Literacy	*Coefficient of variation*		*Highest value*		*Lowest value*	
	1981	*1991*	*1981*	*1991*	*1981*	*1991*
Male	12.57	11.99	84.28 (Trichur)	87.59 (Kottayam)	30.21 (Sambhal)	32.41 (Sambhal)
Female	21.28	19.17	78.87 (Trichur)	85.80 (Kottayam)	18.52 (Sambhal)	21.97 (Sambhal)
Non-scheduled male	11.98	na	85.32 (Trichur)	na	30.84 (Sambhal)	na
Non-scheduled female	19.91	na	80.20 (Trichur)	na	19.28 (Sambhal)	na
Scheduled male	24.47	na	79.76 (Alieppey)	na	20.21 (Sambhal)	na
Scheduled female	50.64	na	69.64 (AUeppey)	na	04.62 (Amroha)	na

* SOURCE: Computed from data as cited in Table 1.

Despite the disparity that exists between male and female literacy rates, the two are themselves highly correlated *(r* = 0.89 in 1981 and 0.74 in 1991) indicating a close spatial covariation of the two rates despite differences in absolute levels. This highly significant positive correlation between the two rates persists when the population is further divided into scheduled and non-scheduled segments *(r* = 0.88 and 0.87 respectively). As indicated earlier, a rise in literacy levels is accompanied by reduction in sex disparities. However, the

6. However, a corresponding lowering of inter-city (and therefore inter-regional) disparities does not necessarily follow. The widely alleged stability in relative position of regions in terms of their literacy status seems to sustain as far as sex disparities therein through three decades, i.e.,, 1961, 1971 and 1981 are concerned (Sahoo 1987: 119).

decrease is more marked if the female literacy increases as is evident from a fairly strong and significant correlation between female literacy and sex disparity (r = - 0.88 in 1981 and - 0.79 in 1991) as compared to a moderately negative one with male literacy *(r* = - 0.63 in 1981 and - 0.41 in 1991). Unless otherwise mentioned, these and subsequent correlation values are significant at the .001 level.

The manner in which disparities are calculated, these negative correlations mean that as male and female literacy increases, the disparity in literacy between the two becomes increasingly negative, i.e., the gender gap in literacy becomes narrower, more so with increase in female literacy. This is not in any way a statistical artifact, a consequence of the way in which disparity itself has been formulated, but a social one. In some cases, sex disparities may actually increase as literacy rises (Sopher 1980:143).

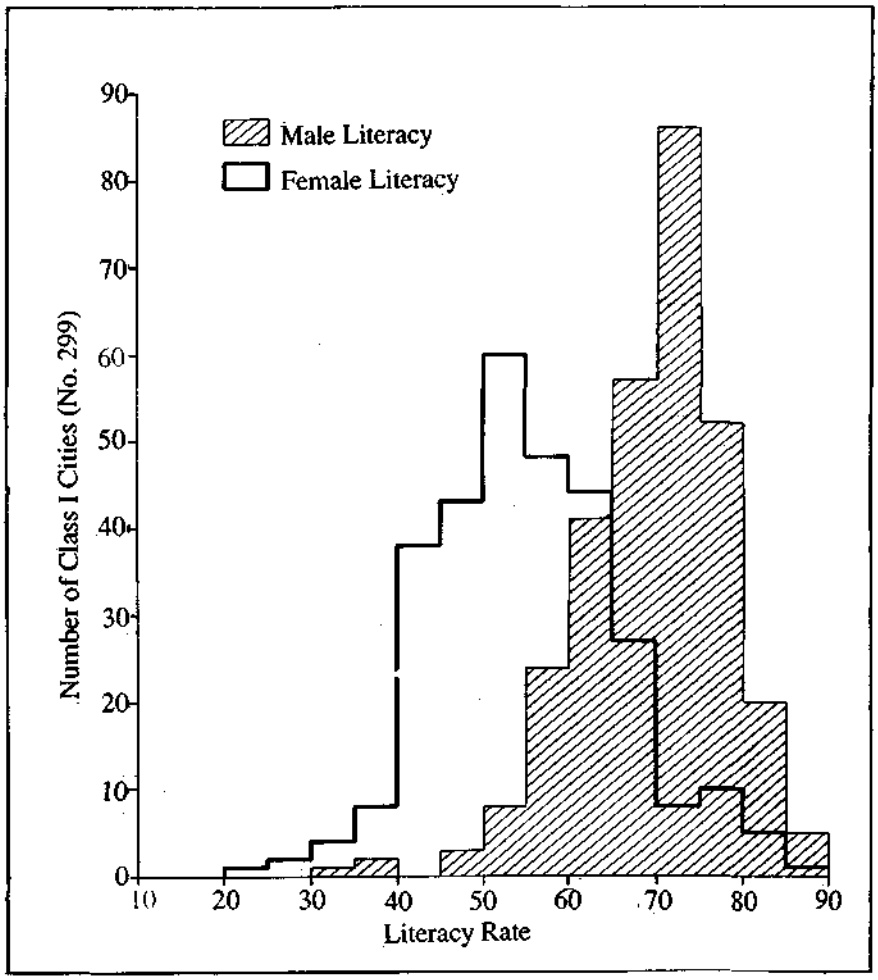

Fig. 1. Male and Female Literacy in Class I Cities – 1991

Gender and Caste Disparities

In his study of literacy Sopher concludes that in terms of literacy women "are indeed a 'depressed class'" because sex disparity in literacy within the same class [caste] is found to be greater than class [caste] disparity in literacy within the same sex" (Sopher 1980: 168). A somewhat similar position is taken by Nuna (1986) when he argues that promoting female literacy has been particularly neglected in the faulty process of development This statement, however, does not hold true for large urban centres, i.e., class I cities of India where the gender disparities within the same caste are relatively smaller as compared to disparities which exist between non-scheduled and scheduled castes within the same sex (Tables 1 and 4). Further, the disparity between the scheduled castes and the non-scheduled caste population is higher for the urban areas than the rural areas. Thus, although urbanisation helps in bringing down the disparity in literacy rates between males and females in all segments of Indian population considered here, such healthy effects are not perceived in case of disparities between the social segments.

This contention is borne by the statistical evidences as well. Compared to the high correlation between sexes in non-scheduled and scheduled caste population, the spatial covariation in literacy among males and females as a whole (irrespective of their caste membership) is weaker, the coefficient of correlation being 0.53 and 0.60 respectively. When the sex disparities within the non-scheduled and scheduled caste components of population are correlated, they covary more significantly *(r* = 0.79) relative to covariation in caste disparities within the same sex *(r* = 0.59). What is being demonstrated is the same strong affinity between male and female literates in respective non-scheduled and scheduled caste populations. As male literacy varies relatively little across space, it is the female component of the matrix whicn has to covary fairly closely to result in a highly associated pattern of variation of sex disparity in literacy among castes. It may be reiterated then that the key distinction is between non-scheduled and the socially underprivileged scheduled castes rather than between gender within the castes. This argument is substantiated by observations made by Kundu (1986: 446).

The relative deprivation of urban scheduled castes in regard to literacy may be because of their restricted access to occupational avenues. It is seen that among migrants, as with the population as a whole, the literacy rates among the scheduled castes are relatively lower as compared to the non-scheduled castes (Kundu 1986: 446). In fact, this relationship is somewhat circular, in that the low literacy of scheduled castes hinders their active participation in work and those activities in which they can be absorbed do not generally have literacy as a prerequisite (Raju 1981: 28-9).

So far, the analysis has essentially been confined to the female and scheduled caste components of population. However, there are several other communities, such as Muslims and Christians whose presence in the population affect literacy. For example, Muslims generally have a negative association with literacy levels as observed at various levels (Krishan and Shyam 1974: 796; Sopher 1980: 162). Conversely, the share of Christians in the population tends to raise literacy.

Geographic Pattern of Sex and Caste Disparity

In 1991,65 per cent of cities have female literacy rates below the national average for city population. The states of Bihar, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal

(partially) account for roughly 40 per cent whereas 27 per cent of such cities are located in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Andhra Pradesh accounts for the largest number of these cities in the southern region. In terms of male/female disparity also, a relatively larger number of cities (40 per cent) in the north have higher values as compared to the cities in the southern states (30 per cent). The situation is just reversed when the cities with male/female disparity values in literacy lower than the national average (for cities as a whole) are considered.

Within the broad north/south division of cities in terms of female literacy, there are spatially contiguous areas with cities having comparable literacy levels. Thus, Uttar Pradesh, eastern Rajasthan and northern region of Madhya Pradesh adjoining Uttar Pradesh have cities with the lowest literacy levels. Regions on or near the west coast from Gujarat to the southern tip of Kerala, parts of Tamil Nadu in the south and Punjab, Haryana, and West Bengal in the north and east are areas of highest literacy. In general, areas with a concentration of cities with high female literacy occupy peripheral locations and are largely coastal.

Coastal regions of India have historically been areas of relatively higher literacy. In general, the explanation lies in their overseas contacts, especially along the more literate west coast where such contacts have been for longer period and more continuous than those of the east coast. Precisely how outside contacts foster literacy—whether by creating a demand for increased literacy or by enhancing the awareness about the value of literacy—is not clear (Sopher 1980: 136).

The distribution of sex disparities is inversely associated with the pattern of female literacy. The relative position of different regions in which cities are located remains essentially the same as for female literacy with the exception of the south-central band covering approximately the former state of Hyderabad (parts of present Maharashtra, north-east Karnataka and western Andhra Pradesh including Rayalaseema) having high sex disparity in literacy, more so in 1981 (Raju 1988). The emergence of former Hyderabad state as a statistical plateau in an otherwise low surface of sex disparity in literacy has a historical antecedent (Sopher 1980). Since the broad region is not characterised by marked Christian presence, the significantly different values for sex disparities in this depressed surface of literacy as against the coastal Andhra which is receptive to female education calj for further probe. Perhaps it is due to differentiation among regional cultures which account for the regional clustering of disparity scores (Sopher 1980: 151).

Though north Indian cities have maintained their overall *status quo* in terms ot lower literacy and relatively higher gender disparities therein in general as compared to other parts of India in 1991, one redeeming and the most significant feature is the decadal reduction in male/female disparity in literacy in the cities of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar

7 The cities which constitute this region are Adoni, Anantpur, Nizamabad, Proddatur and Warangal in Andhra Pradesh, Bijapur, Gulabarga, Hospct and Raichur in Karnataka, and Jalna, Lalnr, Nanded, Parbham and Solapurin Mahatashtra.

Pradesh and Rajasthan. This is in keeping with the pattern emerging through state level data also (Raju 1991).[8]

TABLE 3: PER CAPITA INCOME AND STATE-WISE GENDER AND CASTE DISPARITIES IN URBAN LITERACY, 1971-1991

Stale	*Male/Female Desparily in Literacy****			*Non-Scheduled/Scheduled Caste Disparity in Literacy****		*Per Capita Income*		
	1971	*19S1*	*1991*	*1971*	*1981*	*1971*	*1981*	*1991*
Rajasthan	1*	1*	1*	*5**	*5**	9	13	11
Bihar	2*	2*	2*	1*	*2**	16	15	15
Orissa	3*	3*	5*	4*	6*	13	12	14
Madhya Pradesh	4*	4*	3*	8	9	15	14	12
Jammu & Kashmir**	5*	7*	-	9	12	12	9	-
Andhra Pradesh	6*	5*	5*	9	15	11	10	9
Uttar Pradesh	7*	6*	4*	7*	8*	14	11	13,
Tamil Nadu	8	9	7	10	11	10	7	7
Kamalaka	9	10	7	12	10	7*	6*	6*
Gujaral	10	11	7	14	4*	3*	4*	4*
Maharashtra	11	12	7	13	13	4*	2*	3*
Haryana	12	8	6	2*	1*	2*	3*	2*
West Bengal	13	12	8	6*	7*	5*	6*	8
Himachal Pradesh	14	13	9	11	14	6*	5*	5*
Punjab Kerala	15 16	14 15	10 11	3* 15	3* 16	1* 8*	1* 8	1* 10

Notes:* Above national average in respective categories.
-** Census has not been conducted in Jammu & Kashmir in 1991.
*** The Slates are ranked and arranged in descending order as per first column. **** For 1991, the 1987-88 figures have been updated on the basis of averages for the past five years.

SOURCE : Based on Kundu, A., 1986, 'Inequality in educational developement: Issues in measurement, changing Structure and its socio-economic correlates with special reference lo India'. *In:* Moonis Raza (ed.). *Educational Planning: A Long Term Perspective* (National Institute of Education Planning and Administration: New Delhi), pp. 435-466. Census of India 1981 Part-2H-B, Part-2 of 1991. Central Statistical Organisation's Estimates of State Domestic Product 1970/71-1987-88.

Development and Literacy

A systematic link between development and literacy attainment is difficult lo establish essentially because of arbitrariness of development measures. Besides, a few micro-level

8. Because of the different reference age to record Literate population in 1991 and unvailability of age-specific literacy data for cities in 1981, no comment may possibly be made on the relative position of cities during the past two decades. However, an exploratory attempt has been made here to do so by making the data comparable for 1981 and 1991. For this, the 1981 cities which account for more than 70 per cent of the urban population of the districts where they are located are taken. There are about fifty such cities. This is followed by adjustment in literacy figures of cities thus identified on the basis of the proportion of literate in the age-group 5 to 7 to total literates of respective districts. Trie sajne proportion (both for male and female segments separately) has then been subtracted from the literate population in the cities.

TABLE 4 : CITY CLASS-WISE MALE/FEMALE LITERACY AND DISPARITIES 1981 AND 1991

City Size	Male Literacy	Female Literacy	Male Literacy	Female Literacy	Non-Scheduled	Non-Scheduled	Scheduled Male	Scheduled Female	Sex Disparity		Caste Disparity				Coefficient of variation			
	1981		1991		Male Literacy	Female Literacy	Literacy	Literacy	Total		Non-SC M/F	SC M/F	Non-SC/SC Male	Non SOSC Female,	Male	Female	Male	Female
					1981[a]				1981	1991					1981		1991	
10,00,000	69.66	53.93	72.63	60.70	71.65	56.80	53.82	31.63	0.16	0.12	0.15	0.29	0.18	0.32	6.13	10.79	8.64	14.21
5,00,00 to 9,99,999	68.22	51.55	70,03	59.13	70.16	54.21	53.56	30.89	0.17	0.11	0.16	0.30	0.17	0.31	11.94	21.33	9.32	36.94
2,00,000 to 4,99,999	66.48	48.44	69.53	55.93	68.59	51.26	48.24	24.85	0.19	0.14	0.18	0.35	0.22	0.39	12.37	17.15	12.73	18.39
1,00,000 to 1,99,999	66.13	47.72	69.84	54.58	68.46	50.55	46.46	23.95	0.20	0.15	0.19	0.35	0.24	0.40	13.34	23.89	12.57	20.61

Note:[a] — The disaggregated data for scheduled and non-scheduled caste population is not available for 1991.
SOURCE: Same as for Table 1.

observations may suggest close association between development tevtl and literacy rates which the macro-level analyses obliterate. In the present study, an attempt is made to correlate per capita state income with various aspects of literacy. The rank correlations attempted are between per-capita income on one hand and male/female, non-scheduled/scheduled caste literacy levels for urban population and the disparities therein on the other. Table 3 provides information on these aspects. At the risk of generalisation it may be slated that neither in terms of absolute levels of literacy nor in terms of distributive justice, i.e., reduction in caste disparities, per-capita state incomes seem to have any statistically significant positive correlation with the literacy rates in different states. However, as against absolute levels of literacy for various components of population which show no correlation whatsoever with income, female literacy increases and the male/female disparities in literacy tend to decrease with increase in per-capita income, the coefficients of correlation being 0.61 , 0.60 and 0.55 (significant at the .05 level) and -0.76 and -0.75 and -0.63 (first two significant at .001 and the last one at .02 level) in 197 1 , 198 1 and 1991 for female literacy and gender disparity in literacy respectively. A visual comparison of data also corroborates this observation (Table 3). It may be seen that with very few exceptions the states which are characterised by relatively higher sex disparities for last three decades are invariably those states which have lower per-capita income. The caste disparities, however, do not exhibit such association. In fact, Haryana and Punjab, the two states with highest per-capita income together with Gujarat (in 198 1) have higher caste disparities in literacy as compared to some of the states with very low per-capita income, i.e., Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

In general, the stability of caste relations in literacy is linked with the structural inequalities in the Indian society consequent upon classical separation of work from knowledge and power (Raza and Aggarwal 1984). It is ironical, that these age-old prejudices are not only being actually reinforced instead of being obliterated, there are no evidences to suggest that these differences are getting reduced (Prakash *et al.* 1988: 6). In cities also the situation does not change much and the scheduled castes exhibit low literacy levels (Sahoo 1987: 101-103). What is gratifying to note is that despite a very limited measure of development used in the present analysis, the results are in congruence with elaborate observations made elsewhere, i.e., the urban context does not reduce the disparities in literacy that exist between non-scheduled and scheduled castes population (Kundu 1986: 446).

Thus, although one of the major objectives of any developmental process, i.e. , narrowing of gap between male and female literacy is achieved, a corresponding lowering of caste disparities in literacy is not observed. However, this association is not an unilateral one and regional variations consequent upon localised events are quite significant for under-privileged sections of population. In contrast, as pointed out by Kundu (1986: 450), for non-scheduled caste male population the impact of developmental factors and modernisation are important as they tend to reduce the cross-regional variation in their literacy rates. To this may be added the female component of population as well.

Social Movements in India and their Impact on Caste and Gender Disparities in Literacy: Some Plausible Explanations

At this point it is useful to introduce into the discussion another dimension that links with the contemporary pattern of female literacy. Despite governmental efforts to promote

9. Although per-capita income as a measure of development has obvious flaws, it does indicate relative standing of various stales as far as overall development is concerned.

literacy in India, the relative position of major regions (especially in terms of female literacy) has changed little since the turn of the century. Urban literacy is no exception. As recently as 1981, the location of cities with high levels of female literacy coincides quite significantly with areas which have been above the national average since 1901. Conversely, the cities with low literacy are seen confined to areas of literacy well below the national average ever since 1901! Superimposition of the geographic pattern of female literacy in these cities on a map showing the district-wise pattern of literacy consistency succinctly elucidates the historical relationship (Raju 1988).

In terms of sex disparity in literacy, Punjab and West Bengal in the northern plain are exceptions where cities are characterised by very low values. Sopher argued that the geographically peripheral localities where sex disparities in general are low are also marginal in the Indian cultural realm (Sopher 1980: 183). Hence, they represent marked departures from Hindu social norms which customarily place female literacy at a low priority. He cites Assam, Bengal and Punjab as examples where there exists a 'low proportion of Brahmins in the population, a simple, somewhat fluid traditional caste structure and a large Muslim minority' and also low sex disparities in literacy. Despite its seeming plausibility, such an explanation is not borne out by the urban data.

An essential aspect of the rigid Indian caste system is the presence of a group of scheduled castes with a clearly defined social boundary between them and the non-scheduled castes. By implication, therefore, the peripheral areas cited should also exhibit less pronounced disparities in literacy between non-scheduled and scheduled castes. However, no such pattern is clearly visible. Rather, disparities exhibit a distinct north/south dimension (Raju 1988). Haryana, Punjab and West Bengal, the spatially marginal states, share with Bihar, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, prevailing high disparities in literacy between non-scheduled and scheduled castes. Thus, in this regard, there is no deviation of the spatially marginal states from the centrally located states in the northern plain. Why this should be so is an intriguing question.

There are several other local patterns which call for further investigation. As pointed out earlier, relative deprivation is more pronounced between non-scheduled and scheduled segments of population as compared to male and female components, but for the former Hyderabad state this relationship does not seem to hold. Interestingly, this region is characterised by high values for sex disparity associated with low disparities between non-scheduled and scheduled castes, a situation at variance with that for urban India as a whole. It is not possible to comment on the caste disparity in literacy for 1991 on account of unavailability of data, but in terms of gender disparity therein, more than 75 per cent of cities in Andhra Pradesh still have values above the national average for the cities as a whole.

To obtain a clearer outline of the social lineaments that have constrained Indian women's as well as scheduled castes access to literacy in a given area, it is necessary to examine the significance of relevant social movements together with their ideological -position (see, Schwartzberg 1978). In the present analysis, Haryana, Punjab and West Bengal emerge as areas with very low to low sex disparities in literacy. It may be recalled that it was during the second half of the nineteenth century that the Arya Samaj arose in Punjab and adjoining regions as a response to the numerous conversions to Christianity and Islam especially among depressed castes. The Arya Samaj attempted to rectify the defects of rigidity within Hinduism through questioning the existing basis of the caste system and all the injustice and

human wastage it produced. It was also a movement directed against the British. Inevitably, a new Hindu identity was to be promoted. Although the existence of a caste structure was accepted, it was a variant of the Vedic notion of the four *varnas* wherein caste membership was not ascriptive by birth but by the kind of life one led. However, the Arya Samaj was *not* a movement to elevate the 'untouchables' i.e., the groups who now comprise the scheduled castes and they remained, by and large, socially- marginal even in the new scheme of things (Heimsath 1964:113-30; Jones 1979:7-11; Parvathamma 1983:104- 5). What is important to note, however, is that the education of women was central. Women were considered equal to men. Capable of achieving emancipation, they were to be accorded rights commensurate with their abilities (Heimsath 1964: 120).

The parallel Brahmo Samaj movement founded in Bengal'also did not repudiate Hinduism and was *not* directed at bringing about social equality among different segments of society. However, the movement may be 'credited with establishing a major objective of all Indian social reform movements, the social freedom and cultural advancement of Hindu women' (Heimsath 1964:91). Other social reforms of mid-century Bengal were also closely linked with issues related to women, such as widow remarriage, the abolition of polygamy and above all prohibition of *sati,* the immolation of widows on their deceased husbands funeral pyres (Heimsath 1964 : 74-97; Jordens 1975).

If, indeed, the arguments relating to the historical persistence of the uneven pattern of literacy are accepted, then the extent of low sex disparities in literacy in Bengal, Punjab and its neighbourhood may well, at least partially, be explained within the framework of such social reforms articulated in favour of women.

The case of Kerala with very low caste and gender disparities in literacy needs no elaboration as the circumstances that festered literacy there are too well known to obviate the need for detailed treatment. It may, however, be noted that the high literacy in females associated with a very low sex disparity in Kerala is essentially attributed to a sustained history of traditional learning together with an early start in Western education, both private and under princely patronage (Sopher 1980: 137). So far as the scheduled castes are concerned, the regional movement of relevance in the present analysis is the one formulated by Sri Naryana Guru Swamy among the Izhavas, a numerically strong scheduled caste of toddy tappers in Kerala. Parity in educational opportunities with others was very much a part of this movement to raise the social status of Izhavas (Rao 1979: 30-31).

While the early, essentially upper caste reform movements were not concerned with scheduled castes *per se,* several movements arose from within the backward sections with different, more radical, aggressive, and militant character, which were clearly directed against upper castes and classes (Rao 1979: 10). One of the earliest movements was that of the once migratory Waddars in Karnataka. Subsequent upon their sedentarisation, the emergence of higher aspirations and educational attainment, the Waddars started claiming higher status through appropriate myths and this claim provided the basic ideology for their movement (Bhat 1978: 169-89; Rao 1979: xvi).

Maharashtra is characterised by relatively lower values of caste disparity in literacy (Raju 1988). The state had a series of social movements essentially directed against the supremacy of a few high caste groups. In 1873, Mahatma Phule began his *Satya shodhak* (Search for Truth) *Samaj;* the aim was to save the 'lower castes from the hypocritical Brahmins and their

opportunistic scriptures'. The *Samaj* became the nucleus of a movement in Maharashtra which was to have profound reverberations on social and political life during the 20th century (Heimsath 1964). Later it was under the leadership of Dr, Ambedkar that the Mahars of Maharashtra organised themselves with a view to fight against their scheduled caste status. Fiske (1972: 119) provides information pertaining to the section of Mahars in different districts in Maharashtra who adopted Buddhism. The close correspondence between areas with high Buddhist population and low caste disparity in literacy is quite significant.[10]

Tamil Nadu presents an intriguing case. It is characterised by higher values for both sex and caste disparities in 1981 indicating perhaps a society less affected by national social movements. However, as pointed out by Heimsath (1964: 111), this situation was largely due to a very strong dominance of the Brahmin castes. A structure, undisrupted by frequent Muslim and Maratha influences as compared to northern India, showed no signs then of breaking down under any non-Brahmin pressures. The Brahmins themselves could not possibly advocate any fundamental social change in terms of upliftment of their women without risking their hierarchical supremacy.

In Sum

Despite the apparent confusion in detail and less than satisfactory data base, certain broad patterns emerge whereby the distinction between northern and southern India is reflected in the pattern of female literacy. Instead of having a pan-Indian urban character independent of regional constraints, the cities follow the regional pattern of their locality more closely. Strikingly, the relative standing of major regions where the cities are located seem to have remained essentially the same since the turn of the century. However, despite an overall conformity with the earlier temporally spatial pattern, the situation seems to have improved in 1991 in that the clearer differentiation between cities located in the north and the south witnessed in the 1980's appears to be obliterating. .

In India, women and scheduled castes have traditionally been characterised by low rates of literacy, However, the present analysis shows the distinction to be more strongly marked between non-scheduled and scheduled castes as two different groups rather than between the male and female components of individual castes. The process of development does not seem to have any significant role in reducing this gap. However, the disparities which exist between non-scheduled and scheduled castes are less evident in regions where social reforms directed at improving the condition of scheduled castes have been important.

Despite their marginality in terms of literacy attainment, the levels of female literacy are closely related to those of their male counterparts for both non-scheduled and scheduled caste women. The variation in the presence of communities which foster on hinder female education affects female literacy. Thus, women should be viewed not as a homogeneous body in contextual isolation but as a part of larger varied social realm.

10. There are eight cities which are characterised by especially low caste disparities. These are Bhiwandi, Bhusawal, Chandrapur, Dhule, Gondiya, Nagpur, Nasik and Solapur; with the exception of Bhiwandi, Dhule (Thana district) and Gondiya (Bhandara district) others are major Buddhist Centres. Bhiwandi, Dhule and Gondiya have more than eighty per cent of Mahar population classified as Buddhists. Also, see Schwartzberg's historical atlas, especially maps showing the distribution of Scheduled castes and Buddhist population and the map of 'Religious Revival and Reform Movements' in Section x (Schwartzberg 1978).

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