

Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in West Bengal versus India

Dr. Sobhan Banerjee

Assistant Teacher, Aguibil High School (HS), Purulia, WB

Abstract: Literacy is considered as one of the indicators of educational development of a nation and an essential but necessary step towards education. The advancements in science and technology have induced rapid changes in the material and non-material environment all over the world. The fast changing scenario, however, in turn warrants higher level of understanding on the part of human being to adapt themselves to new environment and conditions. In a country like India with 74.04 percent literacy and with 25.96 percent illiterate masses (Census 2011), there are many impediments in the way of progress and growth. Since there is a direct and functional relationship between literacy and productivity on the one hand and literacy and overall quality of human life represented by better health, hygiene, sanitation and family welfare on the other, educating the illiterates becomes very significant. The significance of universal literacy as an instrument of galvanizing and mobilizing the people arousing community consciousness and community participation for bringing social change was highlighted in the first half of twentieth century. This paper tries to analyse the policies made by the Government of West Bengal in recent time for women's higher education, employment and welfare. In this study, an attempt has also been made to examine the status of women in West Bengal in comparison with all India average. It is found from the analysis that the status of women in West Bengal is comparatively better than the rest of the country only in some selected indicators.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Female literacy, West Bengal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building to greater participation, to greater decision making power and control, and to transformative action which is created only by means of higher education. Empowerment of women is an essential pre-condition for the elimination of world poverty and the upholding human rights. It is positive concept, which enables women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life. Women in India now participate in all activities such as politics, media, art, culture, service sectors, science and technology. The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was passed in 2001. Women play a significant role in the progress of a Nation. Their partnership with men is inevitable, and this becomes more fruitful and meaningful, if they are fully equipped with education. Keeping in view the role and importance of women in upcoming India, the Indian Government in 1947 declared that "the educated conscious mother, who lives and works with her children in the home, is the best teacher in the world of both character and interest....".

Education is a key part of strategies to improve individuals' well-being and societies' economic and social development and "Fundamental Right" of the citizens of a nation. In West Bengal access to education has improved dramatically over the past few decades, and there have been a number of encouraging trends in girls' and women's education. Primary school enrollment is high or universal in this part. Gender gaps in secondary school enrollment have already disappeared. Women are also more likely to enroll in universities than they were in the past. But great challenges remain. Many people, especially girls; are still excluded from education, and many more are enrolled in school but learning too little to prepare them for 21st century job markets. The most worrying aspect of the crisis in education is education's inability to provide

the requirements for the development of the societies. This policy brief offers an overview of education's benefits to women, families, economies, and societies and highlights the ongoing concerns about education in West Bengal. It also looks at education's links with fertility and employment, two important elements in women's empowerment.

2. OBJECTIVES

- i. To present a historical overview of women education in India.
- ii. To evaluate spatial pattern of male-female literacy rates of India.
- iii. To review the Gross Enrolment Ratio in Class I-VIII of Schools for General Education in different states in India.
- iv. To review the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education (18-23 years) for General Education in different states in India.
- v. To identify year wise establishment of girls' colleges in India and West Bengal.
- vi. To identify the status of women enrolment in higher education in West Bengal in respect of other states and UTs.
- vii. To provide some suitable suggestions on the basis of the findings to reduce the gender gap in higher education in India.

3. EDUCATION: A SOCIAL RIGHT AND A DEVELOPMENT IMPERATIVE

The significance of universal literacy and women education as an instrument of galvanizing and mobilizing the people arousing community consciousness and community participation for bringing social change was highlighted in the first half of twentieth century with Mahatma Gandhi describing mass illiteracy as "India's sin and shame". He emphasized the need for universal basic education for children and advocated adult education with a moral component for social and cultural regeneration and a political component for strengthening the national struggle for freedom. After independence, the role of adult education along with universal elementary education – as an agent of social change and development – was duly recognized and given a prominent place in the successive five year plans. However, it is heartening to know that with serious concern shown by the centre and the state governments the situation has constantly been changing, indicating progressive improvement.

Education's importance has been emphasized by a number of international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, recognized that women's literacy is the key to empowering women's participation in decision making in society and to improving families' well-being.

In the increasingly open global economy, countries with high rates of illiteracy and gender gaps in educational attainment tend to be less competitive, because foreign investors seek labor that is skilled as well as inexpensive. Various global trends pose special challenges to women who are illiterate or have limited education. Economies' export orientation and the growing importance of small and medium-sized enterprises create opportunities for women, but women need the appropriate education and training to take full advantage of these opportunities.

In addition, the benefits of female education for women's empowerment and gender equality are broadly recognized:

- As female education rises, fertility, population growth, and infant and child mortality fall and family health improves.
- Increases in girls' secondary school enrollment are associated with increases in women's participation in the labor force and their contributions to household and national income.
- Women's increased earning capacity, in turn, has a positive effect on child nutrition.
- Children- especially daughters- of educated mothers are more likely to be enrolled in school and to have higher levels of educational attainment.
- Educated women are more politically active and better informed about their legal rights and how to exercise them.

4. WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN ANCIENT INDIA

In pre-ancient India, less was thought about female education. However, the Vedic period women had a good access to education, but gradually lost with due time pace. As per record in Sarvamukramika there were 20 women authors of Rigveda. The mention of female scholars and sages of the vedic age like Gargi, Sulabha, Lopamudra, Maitrai, Apala, Vishivavare, Sikata, Ghosha etc. The Indian scriptures like Rig Veda and Upanishads mention about many women sages and seers. Though, in the early Vedic era, they enjoyed equivalent position and rights; after 500 B.C, the position was not same as it started to decline. The Islamic invasion restricted freedom and rights of the women.

5. WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN MEDIEVAL AND COLONIAL INDIA

Historically, the medieval period is attributed as the „dark age“ for women in India. After the introduction of Purdah system, women education in medieval India weakened and declined. Various customs and conventions of diverse religions further deteriorated and depreciated the condition of women. In the Islam religion books had nothing to say about women's education and in that time marketable and madrasas had no women scholars. Women's education in mediaeval India was restricted among the Muslim women due to religion. Luckily, an array of socio religious movements aided to the development of the then women literacy. Indian women education revived with the invasion of the British and with the advent of Bhakti movement. In the 18th century was highly sympathetic towards the exploited position of Indian women because during the time the condition of women in British ruled India was deplorable. Women's education was also neglected in British India and very few women did acquire education specially who belong to the upper caste. In the last of 18th century British Government took the responsibility of educating women. The most significant achievement of the period was a girl's school started for the first time in Bombay in 1824. The Calcutta, Bombay and Madras Universities did not permit admission of girls up to 1875. After 1882 girls were allowed to go for higher education. During British Period the Social Reform Movement of the nineteenth century and the National Movement of the twentieth century which affected the position of women. There were. In short, an awareness of the need to remove social disabilities of women was created and the doors of education were opened for them.

6. WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN MODERN INDIA

The post independent Government of India is more aware of women education, which understood by the apparently rise in literacy rate. Women education has become a compulsory concern resulting in the soar of female literacy rate. The 86th constitutional amendment has made elementary education fundament of children between 6-14 years. The Right to Free and Compulsory Education incorporated in the Constitution of India guarantees free primary school education for both boys and girls up to age 14. The Saakshar Bharat Mission launched the Government of India by for Female Literacy, aims to reduce female illiteracy and spread education and awareness even in the most remote and rural parts of the nation. The University Education Commission (1948-49) made recommendations regarding women education. Smt. Durgabai Deshmukh (the then chairman) set up national Committee on women education in 1958. The resolution on the National Policy on Education (1968) emphasized on women education with views to remove inequalities and disparities.

7. CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS ON WOMEN EDUCATION

Women's rights are secured under the Constitution of India — mainly, equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination; further, India has various statutes governing the rights of women. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42)

8. IMPORTANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR WOMEN IN INDIA

Since the formulation of the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 Government of India, Ministry of human Resource Development, Department of Education, has taken several measures for the promotion of women's education in country. The National Policy on Education (NPE) and Programme of Action (POA) commit the entire educational system

to work for women's equality and empowerment. The modified POA (1992) gives high priority to the education of women, being a factor of the equity package. Besides, this issue is also of economic importance. Education is a major factor in developing and thereby optimizing the contribution of this large segment of society towards socio-economic development. The POA (1992) has identified a number of specific programmes in this area keeping in view the experience in implementing the previous POA. A heartening feature of the decadal census figures of 2011 has been the improvement in the literacy rate of women as compared to that of men. As per the figures 65.46 percent of women were literate compared to 53.67 percent in 2001. The literacy rate in case of females during 2001-2011 is increased by 11.79 percent points as compared to 6.88 percent in case of males.

In the 21st century, nobody can ignore the necessity and urgency of higher education of women. Women's education is needed for both the aspects, individual and social. Higher education helps individual to enhance their confidence, self efficiency, to solve any kind of problems successfully for the benefit of their family, society or for the country as a whole. It can also help to contribute very directly to economic growth and productivity in a country. In India, the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) can be taken as a multi-sectoral approach to women's development. In the same context the National Policy on Education (1986) committed itself to the principle of women's equality and emphasized different programmes for empowerment in order to boost the encouragement and ambition of the women. The Seventh Five Year Plan continued this strategy. The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000) provides directions for all-round development of women. The National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in Informal Sector and the steps needed to give them a better deal. The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment (Swashakti).

9. METHODOLOGY

In this study descriptive methods are followed and secondary data has been collected. For this study data and information has been collected from various books, Research Article, Magazines, Research Journal, E-journal, Report of UGC, and Report of the higher Education Department of West Bengal and also from the higher education department of India. The study is based on secondary data. The status of women in West Bengal in comparison with the rest of India is examined on the basis of different indicators, namely Female Literacy (FL), Female Gross Enrolment Ratio, year wise distribution of colleges in West Bengal in respect to India.

Table 1: All India Literacy Rate Since 1901

Year	Male	Female	Total (Percent)
1901	9.8	0.6	5.3
1911	10.6	1.1	5.9
1921	12.2	1.8	7.2
1931	15.6	2.9	9.5
1941	24.9	7.3	16.1
1951	24.9	7.3	16.7
1961	34.4	13.0	24.0
1971	39.5	18.7	29.5
1981	49.5	24.8	36.2
1991	63.86	39.42	52.11
2001	75.26	53.67	64.84
2011	82.14	65.46	74.04

Source: Census data

It may be seen from the above Table 1 that in 1901 the country's total literacy stood at 5.3% with 9.8% males and 0.6% females. At the time of independence it was just 16.7% (Males 24.9% and females 7.9%) after 60 years it has touched 74.04% for over all literacy with male literacy as 82.14% and female literacy as 65.46%. Literacy movement launched in the country has played a significant role in this spectacular achievement in literacy apart from efforts from the Govt. in strengthening the formal education in the country. Total literacy campaign is a boon for those who have been denied opportunities in schooling, for stay-outs, pull-outs and push-outs mainly due to economic factors and so on.

Table 2: Gross Enrolment Ratio in Class I-VIII of Schools for General Education

States/UTs	Classes I-VIII (6-13 years)			
	Girls	Boys	Total	Rank
Manipur	147.73	155.44	151.64	1
Meghalaya	141.86	135.15	138.49	2
Arunachal Pradesh	138.1	146.31	142.26	3
Mizoram	133.58	142.98	138.33	4
Sikkim	123.37	118.82	121.08	5
Tripura	121.74	123.56	122.66	6
Madhya Pradesh	130.18	133.32	131.81	7
West Bengal	110.74	107.16	108.92	8

Source: Government of India (2012), Data for use of Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission, 10 April.

The gross enrolment ratio of West Bengal with the other states of India is presented in Table 2. When the enrolment rates of Class I-VIII of Schools for General Education in different states of India are compared, it is seen that the enrolment rates are comparatively higher than some states of the rest of India like Bihar, Goa, U.P and Chandigarh.

Table 3: Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education (18-23 years)

States/UTs	All Categories			Rank
	Male	Female	Total	
Chandigarh	52.4	53.8	53.0	1
Tamilnadu	41.1	35.2	38.2	2
Goa	34.9	40.4	37.4	3
Puducherry	39.1	35.1	37.1	4
Delhi	35.7	33.6	34.8	5
Manipur	32.3	34.4	33.4	6
Arunachal Pradesh	36.9	24.9	30.9	7
Sikkim	31.2	24.4	27.9	8
Andhra Pradesh	31.8	23.4	27.6	9
Haryana	28.4	27.3	27.9	10
West Bengal	14.7	10.7	12.8	27
All India	21.6	18.9	20.4	

Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (2011-12), Govt. of India

The gross enrolment ratio of West Bengal with the other states of India is presented in Table 3. When the enrolment rates of higher education (18-23 years) for General Education in different states of India are compared, it is seen that the enrolment rates are comparatively higher than some states of the rest of India like Jharkhand, Assam, Tripura, Chhatisgarh, Bihar etc.

Table 4: Year wise distribution of colleges in India and West Bengal

Year	Total Colleges in India	Total Women Colleges in India	% of Women Colleges in respect of Total Colleges in India	Women Colleges in West Bengal
1970-71	3604	412	11.43	2
1980-81	4722	609	12.90	8
1990-91	7346	874	11.90	1
2000-01	12806	1578	12.32	4
2010-11	33023	3982	12.06	6
2011-12	35539	4266	12.00	0

Source: UGC Annual Report, Annual Report of Department Of Higher Education in West Bengal

Table no 4 shows that, maximum numbers of women's colleges were established in the period of 2011- 12 it was 4266. Highest women colleges (12.90%) were established in respect of total college establishment in the period of 1980-81. A large number of women's colleges were established in West Bengal in the period of 1980-81 it was 8. Through my study it was identified that, in West Bengal 22 colleges were established before 1970. Out of 11,721 women's colleges of India, which were established within the year of 1970-71 to 2011-12 Just 21 colleges were established in West Bengal.

Table 5: State-wise Enrolment of Women at various levels

States/UTs	Ph.D	M.Phil	PG	UG	PG Dip.	Diploma	Integrated	Total
Tamilnadu	5426	7972	247852	1020186	3489	67957	3487	2964487
Karnataka	2726	398	98340	595834	3506	109952	1783	1778089
Andhra Pradesh	2756	500	192584	912550	1500	54278	2527	2772564
Delhi	3322	2321	61922	234441	3654	13524	681	736490
Maharashtra	1688	696	155580	1214884	4317	181919	1539	3689924
Uttar Pradesh	1898	610	160857	1780143	2767	6527	1617	3977579
West Bengal	1073	725	87745	480610	1208	8485	1009	1399316
Rajasthan	1727	272	59720	498273	1722	9101	1864	1485219
Puduchery	1282	19	1529	18874	5	1707	0	48145

Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (2011-12), Govt. of India

Table no 5 shows that, a large number of women were enrolled in higher education in the period of 2011 - 12. Through my study it was identified that, women were established their position in higher education in West Bengal as well as in India.

10. FINDINGS

1. Out of 11,721 women's colleges only 21 colleges were established in West Bengal.
2. According to report of higher education department of West Bengal Total women's colleges in West Bengal were 55. Out of 55 colleges 34 women's colleges are established before 1971.
3. The lowest gender proportion of the teaching faculty of higher education in Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal are followed.
4. In West Bengal women are interested in higher education such as Ph. D, M. Phil and University degree.
5. In most of the cases it is shown that in both undergraduate & post graduate level women enrolment is higher than many states in India.
6. In India out of 29 states & 6 union territories only 8 states & UTs cross 50% women enrolment in respect of total enrolment in higher education.
7. According to UGC Annual Report, it shows that West Bengal gets 27th position in the ranking of state and UT wise women enrolment.

11. SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

1. Scholarship and suitable economical hostel accommodation facilities be provided by the government to encourage the talented women students to pursue vocational and higher education in specialized areas.
2. The number of women's intake in existing colleges be increased considerably.
3. Higher education be linked with specific avenues of employment and part-time employment be provided to the women on a large scale, to enable them to participate in productive activities.
4. Priorities are given to women's participation in teachers' training programme.
5. The recipients of higher education should give an undertaking that they will pay back to Nation in terms of rendering service.
6. More Engineering, Medical Colleges and Women's Polytechnics be set up.
7. High priority will be given to incomes of women and skill formation.

8. Condensed course of education will be strengthened to benefit women and girls in rural and backward areas in a large way.
9. Priority will be given to generation of awareness about the need for improving women's status. Mass communication and folk media will be effectively geared to this end.
10. Voluntary organizations will be promoted and supported by the Govt. to accelerate the process of women's education and development.

12. CONCLUSION

It is observed that complete literacy has not been achieved and this has far reaching socio-economic impacts. Enrolments in schools have improved substantially in recent years but the retention rates are poor, and only a fraction of enrolled students completes even the Primary classes. Completion of Middle and Secondary levels education is still lower. Substantial Gender bias in both access to and completion of education is a major cause of concern. Wide regional variation exists even within this sub-standard performance of the Basic Education System. While few states have performed moderately, other have been abysmally, continue to do so. Factors like poverty, presence of a wide child-labour market, absence of assured employment after schooling, and infrastructural problems are identified as responsible for the ills plaguing Elementary Education System in India. Providing incentives for attending schools, making the schooling process attractive to the children, streamlining the middle and high school curriculum to make it more vocational and job-oriented, and providing better infrastructure for the school are some of the policies likely to improve the scenario.

Even after 56 years of Independence and much advancement of science and technology and drastic social change, the genuine place of women could not be ascertained by attracting them towards education and providing them suitable jobs, according to their qualifications. The country has of course, made progress, but the progress remained at snail's pace. Had the women been educated and involved in the progress of nation, the progress would have been much more than that of today. Keeping in view the role the women have to play and the place they have to secure for national development, the following suggestions are made for, those who really feel concerned with socially, educationally, economically and politically discriminated class of women of the great nation. These suggestions, if headed upon, would certainly increase the enrolment of women in higher institutions and would also increase the representation of women in higher posts.

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