

Intersectional Disadvantage in Attaining Parity in Basic Education: A Gendered Perspective

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Abstract

Literacy is a part of everyday life and affects individuals' capability to not only gather and process information but also to contribute to prospective changes in the global as well as local contexts. Females' exclusion from the institution of education widens gender disparity on the levels of educational credentials, occupational choices, and subsequently in perceiving gendered roles in society. Thus, established gender differences cause inequality between men and women. This paper showcases the status of primary education over a course of time and argues that challenges to attaining gender parity in basic education lie within prevalent traditional and modern perspectives towards gender that is influenced by the social positioning of women amidst multi-layered forms of social stratification in Indian society. The paper is organised into four sections. Part I discusses gender disparity in literacy rates and elementary education in India. Section II compares primary education for males and females across socially disadvantaged groups: Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Section III suggests key challenges to attaining gender parity in elementary education in India and the final section argues why it is pressing to achieve universalised primary education without gendered biases.

Keywords: Basic education, intersectional disadvantage, social stratification, India.

I. Introduction

Amidst the discourse on social-economic transition and cultural transformation in modern society, primary education emerges as a tool for accumulating “cognitive resources” (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, p. 151). The role of primary schooling in modern everydayness is not only limited to economic sustenance for it affects larger social and cultural change—such as gender equality (ILO, 2009; World Bank, 2012), health improvement, and increasing political participation (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). In other words, the ability to reading and writing is a part of everyday life and substantially affects an individual's capability to gather and process information, and contribute to prospective changes in the global and local contexts.

Demand for modern education may be understood as a consequence of the larger economic shift from an agrarian society to an industrial economy (Inglehart & Baker, 2000, p. 20), in which the type of occupation changed from agriculture labourer to industrial worker. Hence, since its inception, modern education was perceived as a tool for gaining economic benefits in the public sphere. Historically, as this sphere has been male-dominated, education being understood as a tool for success in the *public* domain, was mostly limited to men and excluded women from its benefit for a long time in history.

Females' exclusion from the institution of education widened gender disparity not only on the levels of education credentials and occupational choices but also in perceiving gender and gendered roles in society. This created gender differences eventually turn into inequality between men and women. For instance, in the arena of employment, women and men are provided with

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different wages even though the work profile is the same (ILO, 2009, p. 18). Among other factors, the gendered gap in educational attainment explains the particular position of men and women in both public and private spheres. In South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, men are more educated than their women counterparts when given choice, women tend to work in the lower-paying industry and earn far less than men (ILO, 2009).

This paper addresses basic education, which includes the status of literacy and elementary education. Literacy and school education are inextricable to the idea of social development in general and argued to be one of the aspects of Human Development¹. Literacy is crucial, and a potential target for it has “an upper limit of 100 per cent of the population” (Easterlin, 2000, p. 23). Attaining literacy immensely affects the quality of life of individuals and society as a whole, for “in the modern world, where so much depends on the written medium, being illiterate is like being imprisoned, and school education opens a door through which people can escape incarceration” (Drèze & Sen, 2013, p. 107). Furthermore, the universalization of elementary education, beyond mere literacy, is a requirement for translating demographic advantages into social, economic and political enhancement (Rustagi, 2013).

Female literacy has been an agenda in most of the national policies in developing countries. In India, literacy rate and the proportion of school enrolment have drastically improved over the past few decades. It was possible partly due to the parental aspiration for their children, but largely because of the intervention of supra-state organizations such as United Nations and World Bank. Millennium Development Goal (World Bank, 2012, p. 58) of attaining universal primary education by 2015, for instance, was one major impetus for bringing about educational change in policy provisioning at the national level. Although these global initiatives have severely affected the state of education at the local level, improvement in education sector does not mean that access to elementary education in India is devoid of all ailments. Rather, issues and challenges to achieving universalised primary education beyond mere literacy are both archaic as well as contemporary.

Through drawing on aspects of basic education, which includes the status of literacy and elementary education, this paper showcases how the status of primary education for girls has changed over a course of time. It argues that challenges to attaining a gender parity in basic education lie within the prevalent traditional and modern perspectives towards gender and gendered roles compiled with the social positioning of females amidst multi-layered forms of social stratification in modern Indian society. The essay is organised into four sections. Section I discusses gender disparity in literacy rates and elementary education in India. Section II compares basic education for males and females across socially disadvantaged groups: Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Section III suggests key challenges to attaining gender parity in elementary education in India. The final section argues why it is pressing to achieve universalised basic education.

II. Basic education in India: A gendered perspective

Literacy

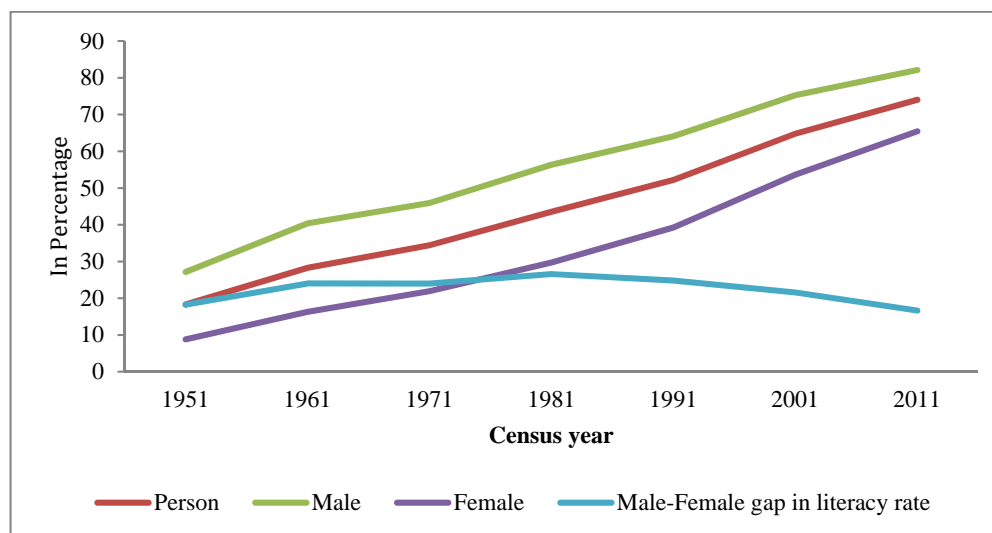
This section covers the status of literacy and elementary education in India across states, and over a course of time. The rate of effective literacy² in India is 74 per cent. The proportion of literate to the entire population has increased from 18 per cent in 1951 to nearly three-quarter in 2011 (see Figure1). The improvement in literacy has been slow. In 1971, one-third of India's

¹ United Nations Human Development Index composes of three factors: GDP per capita, Life expectancy at birth, and composite measure of education based on literacy and school enrolment (Easterlin, 2000, p. 8).

² Effective literacy means the proportion of 7 and above population who can read and write with understanding in any of the languages to the entire population in the same age range (ORG & CS, 2011).

population was literate; it was only in 1991 when it crossed the fifty per cent mark. The highest rate of increase in literacy was observed in 1951-61 at 72 per cent. The rate of increase in literacy declined in subsequent years: most recently from 2001 to 2011 when the increase was merely 26 per cent. By 1961, India crossed one-third of male literacy. However, this target was achieved for females only in 1991. Similarly, while male literacy surpassed fifty per cent mark in 1981, it took two more decades for women to reach that level.

Figure 1. Literacy rate in India (1951-2011)



Source: ORG & CS (2011)

As per Census of India-2011 (ORG & CS, 2011), the gap between male and female literacy is of 17 per cent point—literacy rate for men is 82 per cent while it is 65 per cent for women. The gap between male and female literacy has declined over a course of time. However, the observed changes are not very drastic. The difference between male and female literacy varies from 21 to 27 per cent point from 1961 to 2001 (see Figure 1). Hence, although the gap between male and female literacy levels has decreased, the difference persists. From another perspective, the current literacy rate in India leaves 273 million people (aged seven years and above) with an inability to read and write (ORG & CS, 2011). The increasing level of literacy shadows an actual number of illiterates in India. According to Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2006), India contributes 35 per cent of global illiteracy. Proportionally more females than males are devoid of their right to literacy. Being a relatively diverse nation-state, the status and cause of illiteracy significantly vary across the region, location, disadvantaged social groups, religion and gender across other variables. Along with literacy, another crucial point of analysis is the status of elementary education for boys and girls.

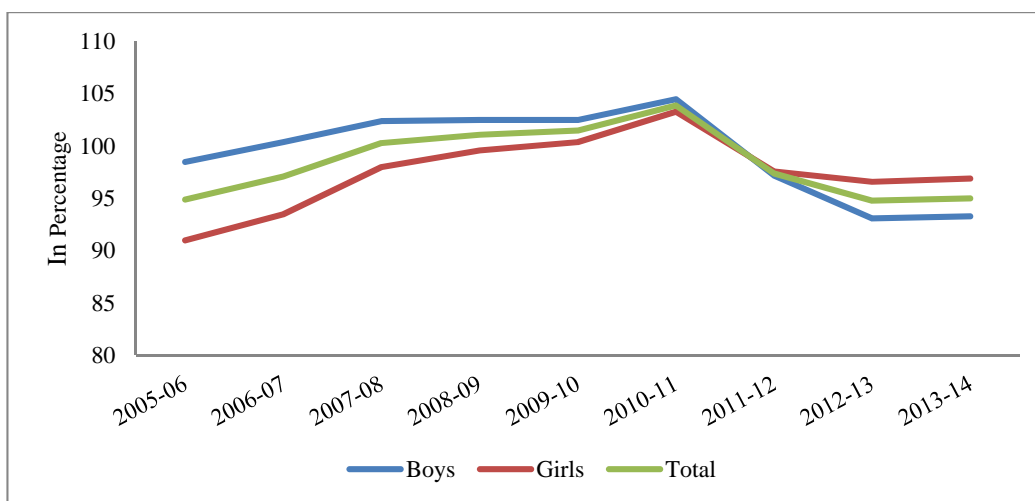
Elementary education

Elementary education consists of schooling from Grade 1 through Grade 8, which this corresponds to the age range of 6 to 14 years. Elementary education is further categorised into primary (Grade 1-5) and upper primary levels (Grade 6-8). The magnitude of institutions of learning has tremendously increased since the 1950s, i.e. number of schools rose from two hundred thousand in 1950-51 to 1 million in 2004-05 and 1.3 million in 2009-10. The number of teachers increased from 0.6 million in 1950 to 3.75 million in 2004 and 3.9 million in 2009-10. With this expansion of infrastructure and implementation of educational policies, the rate of enrolment hiked substantially in the past two decades (Government of India, 2011). The number of children enrolled at elementary levels increased from 22 million in 1950-51 to 182 million in 2004-05 and 188 million in 2009-10.

GER³ (Gross Enrolment Ratio) at primary level is 115 per cent. This indicates a mismatch between 6-10 years of age with the grades 1 to 5 and the possible reasons for this might be under aged and over-aged children, or repetition in these standards. NER⁴ (Net Enrolment Ratio), on the other hand, has improved from 85 per cent in 2005-06 to 98 per cent in 2009-10 at primary level. However, NER at upper primary levels remains dismal, i.e. 58 per cent in 2009-10, suggesting drop out and lack of records in-between primary and secondary levels of education. Another crucial aspect is dropout rate.

The latest recorded GER at elementary levels in the year 2013-14 is 95 per cent. The proportion of girls' enrolment is higher (97 per cent) than of boys (93 per cent). From 2005-06 to 2013-14, GER at the elementary level of education varied from 95 to 104 per cent. The year 2010-11 recorded the highest GER. Noticeably, till 2008-09 GER for boys has been higher and later it was observed more for girls than for boys (see Figure 2). Also, gender parity at the elementary level is 1.04 in 2013-14, but it was only in 2010-11 when it reached 1.00. Its level decreases at post-elementary levels (see Government of India, 2014). From the other side of the spectrum, at elementary levels, overall dropout rate is 36 per cent and for girls 33 per cent (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Gross Enrolment Ratio (2005-06 to 2013-14)



Source: Government of India (2014)

At primary levels, the dropout rate is substantially lower than at elementary levels—the overall difference is 16.5 per cent point. The difference between dropout rate at primary and elementary levels is 14.6 and 18 per cent points for girls and boys respectively. It is evident from Figure III that the dropout rate at primary levels for females has been higher than their male counterparts until 2011-12. Except for the increase between 2008-9 and 2009-10, the dropout rate for women has been declining steadily. However, for boys, the decline is rather slow. At the higher secondary (Classes I to X), the dropout rate in 2013-14 was recorded to be 47.4 per cent, the proportion of boys and girls were 48 and 47 per cent respectively, but this proportion was higher among girls until 2012-13.

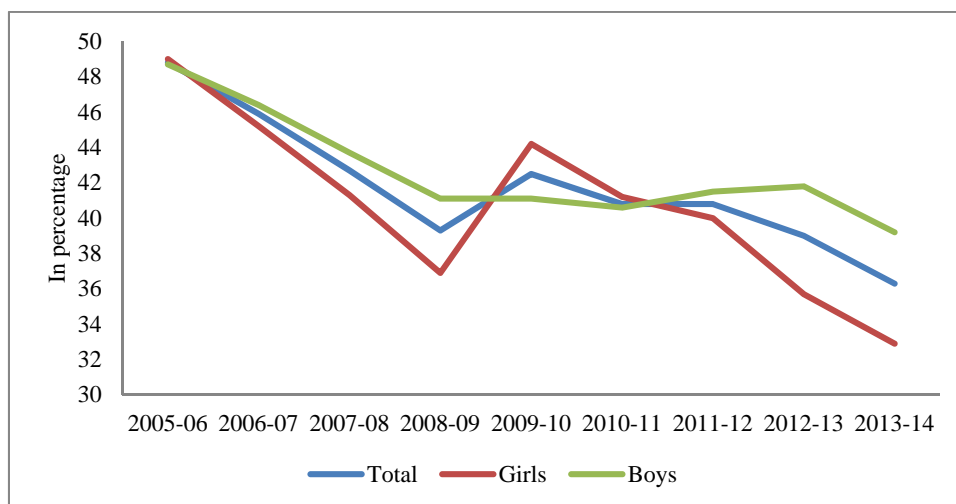
Although the number of schools has increased, 15 per cent of the total schools (650 thousand) have only a single teacher which means that the school does not open if the teacher is unavailable for any personal (illness and so on) or profession (attending training course) reasons (NCERT, 2005). On the other side of the spectrum, although the level of enrolment has risen across

³ GER indicates how many children, regardless of their age, are enrolled in primary (or any other level) school, relative to the population of primary (selected other) school age.

⁴ NER indicates the number of children within the stipulated school age enrolled in school with respect to the population of the selected school age

gender and other forms of social stratification, the mean year of schooling for the population aged seven years and above is merely 4.2 (2007-08), an increase from 3.4 years in 1999-2000 (NSSO, 2010). In other word, on an average, the total numbers of people whose age is seven and above years have even completed the primary levels. Therefore, it may be argued that a large proportion of the population is “near-illiteracy” because only “few years of education and subsequently discontinuation lead to loss of learning” (Rustagi, 2013, p. 251). These aspects still plague the current system of elementary education. Therefore, instead of making the target of increasing the level of enrolment, the state should act towards ensuring that every enrolled child receives quality education.

Figure 3. Dropout Rate at elementary levels (2005-06 to 2013-14)



Source: Government of India (2014)

III. Status of education: A multi-layered approach

Literacy

This section adds to the previous analysis and examines the level of literacy and attainment of elementary education across gender and socially disadvantaged categories of people. The rate of illiteracy among males and females is daunting as it is, a more crucial aspect to explore is the intersectional positioning of women across categories of space (rural and urban), and socially disadvantaged groups, i.e., Scheduled Castes/SCs and Scheduled Tribes/ STs. The disparity in the aspects of social development including literacy levels between rural and urban areas is significant.; It is aggravated when compared across gender and socially disadvantaged groups. It is found that 67 per cent population in rural areas and 84 per cent in urban areas is literate (Table 1). Literacy rate among SCs is 66 per cent and 59 per cent for STs, which is far below the national average of 74 per cent. Also, the literacy rate for SCs and STs living in the urban areas is 13 and 20 per cent point respectively higher than their counterparts in the rural areas.

These two significant socio-economically disadvantaged groups in India—scheduled castes and scheduled tribes—consist of one-fourth of India’s population. Scheduled castes (16.8 per cent) are a dispersed group of low-caste Hindus or Dalits (Kumar, 1992). Because of it, they have been subjected to social discrimination and marginalization for centuries. STs consist of 8.6 per cent of India’s population and usually live in clusters and in states like Nagaland and Mizoram their proportion to the state population is as high as 86.5 per cent and 94.4 per cent respectively but almost negligible in some other states. There are considerable diversities within these two groups, and most of these differences are hierarchical (Sedwal & Kamat, 2011, pp. 86-122).

Table 1. Comparison of effective literacy rate across social groups in 2007-08

	Social Group				All
	SC	ST	OBC	Others	
Rural					
Male	70.6	69.3	77.7	84.6	77.0
Female	49.9	47.8	55.4	68.8	56.7
Persons	60.5	58.8	66.7	76.9	67.0
Urban					
Male	83.1	86.0	88.3	93.8	89.9
Female	66.1	69.0	74.6	85.5	78.0
Persons	74.9	78.0	81.7	89.9	84.3

Source: Rustagi (2013, p. 250)

Inter-sectional and intra-sectional gender and regional disparity in literacy levels reflect rural-urban division in literacy on gender. Notably, the rural-urban divide affects literacy levels of both the genders. But it has a greater impact on women's literacy than men's. Gender difference in literacy rate in rural areas is 20 per cent point, whereas in urban areas it is 12. Although urban areas demonstrate lesser gender difference in literacy, the difference is wider in rural areas. The difference in male literacy between rural and urban areas is 11 point, far less than the difference in female literacy, which is 21.2 points. Far more females in urban areas are literate. Interestingly, male literacy rate in rural areas is less than the female literacy in urban areas.

Now, fascinating differences arise when gender is compared across regions and social groups, for the divide is further intensified with gender disparity. This observation is based on the gender comparison of literacy among scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in rural and urban areas. Among scheduled castes, the gender difference in literacy levels is higher in rural areas (20 points) than in urban areas (15 per cent). Similarly, for the scheduled tribes, the gender gap varies from 12.9 per cent points in urban areas to 19.9 per cent points in rural areas.

The literacy rate for females varies not only based on the location but also according to their social groups. The literacy rate for females in urban and rural areas is 78 per cent and 57 per cent respectively. The difference in female literacy rate within SCs and across rural and urban regions is 16.2 points, and this gap is greater (21.2 points) for the STs. Similarly, an astonishing comparison may be made between females belonging to SCs or STs, and living in the rural areas with females belonging to non-disadvantaged category and living in urban areas.

Elementary education

Similar to the literacy status of females and males across disadvantaged groups, elementary education in these groups positions females variously in Indian society. Although GER across socially disadvantaged group seems higher than the national average, interestingly enrolment status of girls belonging to the socially disadvantaged category is also greater than the national average for girls' enrolment. That is, while GER at the national level is recorded at 95 per cent, it is 102.8 for SCs and 101.5 for STs. For boys, the average GER is 93.3 per cent; however, it is 104.2 and 102.5 per cent for boys belonging to SC and ST categories respectively. Similarly, GER for girls is 96.9 per cent. However, for girls belonging to SC and ST categories, it was recorded as 109.4 and 100.5 per cent respectively. Now, at the level of gender parity, the national average is 1.04 at elementary levels. The corresponding proportion for SCs and STs is 1.05 and 0.98 per cent respectively. Gender parity declined with increasing level of educational attainment in both the categories. Also, SC group reached gender parity in elementary education in the year 2010-11, whereas it has not been accomplished among the Scheduled Tribes.

Furthermore, the rate of dropout for SCs and STs at elementary level is 38.8 and 48.2 per cent, which are 2.5 per cent point and 11.9 per cent point higher than the national average for SCs and STs respectively (see Table 2).

Table 2: Dropout rate at elementary levels (in percentage)

	Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Tribes	All
Girls	34.4	46.4	32.9
Boys	42.4	49.8	39.2
Total	38.8	48.2	36.3

Data Source: U-DISE-2013-14 (Provisional); Government of India (2014).

Overall, the dropout rate among boys is higher (39.2) than among girls (32.9). This trend exists among the disadvantaged groups, i.e., more proportion of boys than girls drop out of schools. However, the dropout rate for disadvantaged groups, both boys and girls, is higher than the national average. While among SCs, the difference from national average is lower for girls (1.5 per cent point) as compared with boys (3.2 per cent point), the scenario is opposite in the case of STs. While dropout rate among boys belonging to ST category is 10.6 per cent point higher than the national average, it is 13.5 per cent point higher among girls from the same social group. Until 2010-11 for SCs and until 2012-13 for STs, more than half of the children enrolled at the school, which also belonged to these socially disadvantaged categories, used to drop out of school at elementary levels. It is observable in Table 3 that the dropout rate for girls used to be higher than their boys' for a long time, and it is relatively recently that girls' dropout rate is lower than of boys in both the categories.

Table 3: Dropout rate across gender and social categories, 2005-06 to 2013-14

Year	All		Scheduled Castes		Scheduled Tribes		Overall
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
2005-06	48.7	49.0	53.7	57.1	62.9	62.9	48.8
2006-07	46.4	45.2	51.6	55.0	62.8	62.2	45.9
2007-08	43.7	41.3	53.6	51.1	62.6	62.3	42.7
2008-09	41.1	36.9	50.3	43.3	58.5	60.0	39.3
2009-10	41.1	44.2	50.8	51.5	54.6	59.1	42.5
2010-11	40.6	41.2	46.8	39.1	54.7	55.4	40.8
2011-12	41.5	40.0	43.3	36.4	57.3	57.1	40.8
2012-13	41.8	35.7	43.3	35.3	50.6	47.5	39.0
2013-14	39.2	32.9	42.4	34.4	49.8	46.4	36.3

Source: Government of India (2014)

Nevertheless, in both categories, more proportion of socially disadvantaged boys/girls drop out than what the national average for boys'/girls drop out suggests. In both the genders, while dropout rate among SCs has neared the average level of dropout over a course of time, the gap for STs remain substantially remarkable. It means although SCs have improved not only in enrolment in schools but also in retaining themselves within the education system, the same may not be so for the other socially disadvantaged groups. Among STs, girls' proportion of remaining at school has been coming closer to the national average, while boys' proportion of dropping out of school seem significantly more than the national average as well as the percentage of boys belonging to the SC category.

IV. Challenges to attaining gender parity in basic education: A discussion

Though the government reports claim a successful attainment of universal elementary education, however, the drive to attain this goal remains substantially unsuccessful if examined from a gendered perspective. Putting it differently, a range of policies, acts and programmes at multiple levels of governance—central, state, district, block and village—could not result in either complete literacy or universal elementary education. While the availability of schools has expanded, and the number of children enrolled in elementary education has increased, a significantly high proportion of girls in the age group of 6 to 14 years are illiterate, and the ones who are enrolled have either never attended schools or have dropped out. All in all, the fact is that more than one-third of women's population in India is illiterate and will be devoid of many benefits and better quality of life.

Lower female literacy and relatively lower enrolment in primary schools across states in India are justifiable in the light of the poor quality of learning, teaching and facilities at a school (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2011). The primary reason for the ineffective implementation of education interventions lies in the aspects of unavailability and inaccessibility to “functional schools”. “Functional school” means a school with necessary facilities such as classrooms, teachers, teaching and learning materials, drinking water, separate toilets for females and males, computers, ramp for the students with disability, electricity connection, library, boundary wall, playground and so on (NUEPA, 2011). Accessibility means not only geographical reach to the school but also social acceptability of education for all the sections of society irrespective of their socio-economic position.

The gender gap is an issue, but the above analysis suggests that it is not simply gender that might be the reason of female illiteracy, rather multiple layers of stratification put women into vulnerable or relatively disadvantaged situations than their male counterparts. Put differently, gender disparity exists in intersectionality of social stratification of caste, region, religion and so on. Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are major disadvantaged social groups⁵ in India, but notably, spatial (i.e., rural and urban) dimension affects their status of economic development across the region. Also, multiple layers of traditional (such as caste, tribe and class) and modern (education, occupation) stratifications make females' position across these groups in rural and urban areas more precarious. Discrimination against SCs and STs is “firmly embedded in wider inequalities of poverty and deprivation”; one of the key reasons for low educational enrolment rate is the discriminatory treatment experienced by their children at school and “...sometimes are asked to sit separately and are not permitted to drink from the same source of water as other students” (Bandyopadhyay & Subrahmanian, 2011, p. 138). Thus, gender disparity—national-level comparison between men and women, rural-urban, SCs, and STs at individual and intersectional level portrays multiple strata of the issue.

V. Basic education for ensuring better quality of life

The need of improvement of basic education has not been more pressing than now. The role of education is not only limited to gain literacy or securing employment, but it is also a tool for transformation of society. Transformative nature of education lies in changing the perception of individuals about deep-rooted conceptualisation of gender and gendered roles. Education impacts social, economic and political lives of people. It plays a pre-requisite role in realising several aspects of social development that finally create a possibility of living a substantially better quality of life. In other words, as Drèze and Sen (2013) argue, deprivation of basic education – “ability to read and write and count” (p. 107) – invariably leads to the marginalization of a large segment of India's population. Attainment of basic education would allow people to exercise their rights and address their concerns. This section discusses three aspects – rights, political empowerment and

⁵ Article 341 (for SCs) and Article 342 (for STs) recognises these groups as historically disadvantaged sections of Indian society. Further information is presented later in the essay.

decision-making power of women. It suggests that basic education is an active player in ameliorating the status of women in Indian society.

First is the aspect of rights and an ability to voice up against the violation of human rights. In the absence of environment for asserting own rights, all other opportunities cannot be effectively availed by women. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (Government of India, 2004), in every three minutes a crime is committed against women—molestation in every 15 minutes, rape in every 29 minutes, sexual harassment in every 53 minutes, dowry death in every 77 minutes, and the case of cruelty by husband and relatives is recorded in every nine minutes. These cases are “recorded” and the frequency of each of them would be much higher for most of such cases remain unspoken about. Although these cases cut across the class, region and so on, Mukhopadhyay (2009) notes that a majority of them occur in the socio-economically disadvantaged households where females tend to be either illiterate or less educated. Basic education plays a crucial role in providing women with knowledge about their legal and human rights and, therefore, plays an important role in women’s empowerment (Mukhopadhyay, 2009; Drèze & Sen, 2013).

The second aspect is the political empowerment of women through basic education. India is a decentralised parliamentary democracy. A unique element in this system is Panchayati Raj or three-tier institution of government at village, block and district levels. It is like a pyramid: central (or union) government at the top and followed by states. Each state has several districts, each district is made up of several blocks, and each block has a certain number of villages. The people elect leaders at each level in the three-tiers. To make a fair representation, 73rd amendment act (Government of India, 1992) advised for proportional representation of SCs and STs and reservation of one-third of leadership positions at each level to be made available to females. The act was implemented across states, and many women were elected as representatives. But the real story is a bit different. With limited or no literacy among women in rural areas, most female representatives were mere puppets to the dominant male members of the family. Similar were the stories of female representatives from socially disadvantaged groups (Vyasulu, P. & Vyasulu, V., 1999; Teltumbde, A. 2011; Chattopadhyay & Dulfo, 2004).

In contrast, better literacy among rural masses resulted in greater effectiveness of the three-tier system and significantly faster achievement in the social development of the region. Examples are Himachal Pradesh and Kerala. Both states have almost 100 per cent literacy and emulative models of self-government. These states have surpassed the issues and concerns of fundamental necessity of hunger and education and are demanding a better quality of life through enhanced level of health care system (Drèze and Sen, 2013). Enhancement of adequate representation of women would inevitably lead to tackling of a majority of issues about discrimination against women in public and private spheres in social life.

The third aspect is women’s role as decision-makers. Formal education tends to enhance autonomy among females for making decisions (Inglehart & Baker, 2000, p. 22). This power does not only relate to the political stances of women’s role in developing and executing government policies but also in making choices for themselves and their children. Literacy level reduces chances of maternal mortality, specifically caused by multiple births in a short span of time (WHO, 2005). The WHO report also highlights that education is a crucial factor along with the availability of health services to women. Teenage pregnancy is another issue that has been widely talked about in the context of India, where in some regions the girl child is married off at the age of 9 or 10 years only. Education, along with law and order, has played a crucial role in changing societal perception about the age of marriage for females. The power of decision-making leads to empowerment of women in accessing resources and opportunities such as land, employment and in exercising their autonomy (UNDP, 2005, p. 33).

Whether education would lead to employment is another debate, but the act of sending daughters to school somewhat reduces the gender gap in economic, social and political spheres within and outside homes. The above case is an example of “feedback loop” (Mehrotra &

Delamonica, 2007) in education, i.e., women with education tend to send their children – girls and boys alike – to school and contribute to setting a trend. This point leads to the final section on teasing out the key challenges in the attainment of gender parity in basic education in India.

VI. Conclusions

This paper establishes that deprivation of accessing basic education in India is affected by modern as well as traditional ailments. In a decentralized democracy, such as India, the state and society must function together in resolving these issues. On modern concerns, the fundamental challenge is a severe shortage of well-equipped institution of learning. Mere establishment of a building in the middle of a village with a single teacher without electricity, toilet facility, or teaching and learning material does not qualify the building as a school. Addressing these concerns would make the schools, at least, available to all children. Here, availability also means geographical accessibility. If children have to travel ten kilometres to go to a school every day, the school is not available to them rather children are pushing hard to *making* it available.

Entering schools requires courage and determination from a majority of children coming from the disadvantaged section of society. A deeper challenge to attaining basic education lies in transcending traditional perceptions that leave educational institutions inaccessible in spite of their availability to a particular section of the population. Mere enactment of law and provision of financial and infrastructural support cannot bring about gender parity in education. A larger structural shift ought to be taken into consideration to address this issue. Finally, this paper establishes that gender and aspects of social development cannot be singularly studied, for every gendered individual also assumes various other social identities that are prevalent in any given cultural setting. In the context of female literacy, however, this paper has attempted to put this concern into perspective and argues that local changes are crucial to contemplate for basic education, which is not just limited to basic reading, writing and arithmetic. Rather, education challenges existing age-old traditions of perceiving females and what they are capable of doing.

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