



Womens Literacy in India- Issues and Challenges

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As Kofi Annan said, “Literacy unlocks the door to learning throughout life, is essential to development and health and opens the way for democratic participation and active citizenship”

Every issue that our society faces is like a link of a chain. Each issue is connected to another either directly or indirectly. Illiteracy is the mother of all issues as it gives birth to many other issues like poverty, unemployment, child labour, female foeticide, population burst and many more.

It is very hard to digest that the land of the Vedas is one of the countries with the highest illiteracy levels and shows the inability of our government to utilize programs like *sarva shiksha abhiyan* and *National literacy mission*. Even countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Vietnam and the like have achieved, in lesser time, a much better percentage of literacy.

Literacy in India is a key for social economic progress. Literacy of girls is vital not only on grounds of social justice but also because it accelerates social transformation. Level of literacy and educational attainment are important indicators of development of any given society. Spread and diffusion of literacy is generally associated with essential trait of today's civilization such as modernization, communication and commerce. High level of literacy and educational achievements leads to greater development, awareness and empowerment of women and girls. Education leads to greater control over their lives and choice. World Bank studies have established the direct and functional relationship between literacy and productivity on the one hand and literacy and the overall quality of human life on the other.

The 15th official census in India was calculated in the year 2011. After the 2011 census, literacy rate in India was found to be 74.04%. Though this seems like a very great accomplishment but it is still a matter of concern that so many people in India cannot know read and write. The number of children who do not get education in rural areas is still high. Now if we consider female literacy rate in India then it is lower than the man literacy rate. Today the female literacy rate area 65.46% where the male literacy rate is over 80%. The differences in literacy rates among the states are also extreme. Kerala has the highest female literacy rate. On the other hand Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have low female literacy rate. Illiteracy in India is characterised by wide gaps between the urban and rural populations. The rural population depends mainly on agriculture and the rate of illiteracy is high while the urban population is more of the employee class and also more educated.

The literacy rate in India 1951-2011 (census of India)

Census year	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86
1961	28.30	40.40	15.35
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97
1981	43.57	56.38	29.76
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29
2001	64.83	75.26	53.67
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46

As swami Vivekananda said, “It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing”.

Now we need to think why the literacy rate is low here in India compared to other developed countries. No single factor can be held responsible for very low literacy rate of women in India. Subsequently it is associated with combination of many factors including social, cultural, economic, educational, demographic, political and administrative and so on.

The Indian government has expressed a strong commitment towards education for all; however India still has one of the lowest female literacy rates in Asia. This low level of literacy not only has a negative impact on women's lives but also on their families' lives and on their country's economic development.

The following are the some of the important factors which could affect the low literacy rate of women in India-

- **Poor school environment for girls**

In general the school environment for girls in India is not really interesting and encouraging. There are still many schools with poor basic amenities such as drinking water, latrine and toilet facilities, improper building and inadequate number of teachers especially female teachers preferable for any parents for safety of their girl children from different types of exploitation and abuse.

- **The lower enrolment**

The major educational problem faced by girls, especially girls from rural areas, is that although they may be enrolled at the beginning at the year, they do not always remain in school. Girls are often taken out of school to share the family responsibilities. Children belonging to low caste families are forced to learn skills and work and not encouraged to go to school due to various factors in the sphere of strict instruction from high caste communities for their selfish motives of keeping them as domestic servants. The data on school attendance collected by the World Bank shows the proportion of girls attending school decreases with age while for boys it remains stable. On the 21 February 2005, the Prime

Minister of India said that he was pained to note that “only 47 out of 100 children enrolled in class 1 reach class 8, putting the dropout rate at 52.78%”.

- **Dowry system**

In India, dowry refers to the durable goods, cash and real or movable property that the bride’s family gives to the bridegroom his parents or his relatives as a condition of the marriage. The dowry system is thought to put great financial burden on the bride’s family. Dowry system and other social act as main causes of the neglect of the girl child and discrimination against girl child including the deprivation of right to education. In some cases, the dowry system leads to the crime against women ranging from emotional abuse, injury to even deaths.

- **Early marriage**

Early or child marriage in India, according to Indian law, is a marriage where either the woman is below age 18 or the man is below age 21. Most child marriage involves underage women, many of whom are in poor socio-economic conditions. Jharkhand is the state with highest child marriage rates in India. Rural rates of early marriages were three times higher than urban India rates in 2009. There is high association of female literacy with female age at marriage. By and large the female age at marriage of 18 as prescribed by various legislations not at all followed in India. It is very much ignored and neglected by the families of parents with low literacy.

- **Priority to son’s education compared to daughter’s education**

Many parents view educating sons as an investment because the sons will be responsible for caring for aging parents. On the other hand parents may see the education of daughter a waste of money as daughter will eventually live with their husband’s families and the parents will not benefit directly from their education.

- **Poverty**

Poverty happens to be the single biggest cause of illiteracy in India and a precursor to all other effects. Women are found to be economically very poor all over the India. A few women are engaged in services and other activities. So, they need economic power to stand on their own legs on par with men. Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the world. Sex slaves are a direct outcome of poverty. In a poor family, girls are the main victims; they are malnourished and are denied the opportunity of better education and other facility. If poverty were not a concern, then the girl child will be able to follow her dreams without concerns of sexual exploitation, domestic abuse and any education or work. . Numerous studies show that illiterate women have high levels of fertility, poor nutritional status, low earning potential and little autonomy within the household.

Literacy details in India 2011 (census report 2011)

population	2011 census
Poverty(population living on less than US\$1.25 per day)	42%
Total expenditure on education as % of GNP	4.1
Primary school net enrolment	95%
Primary school completion rate	90%
Total youth literacy rate(15 – 24 years)	Female 65% Male 81% Total 73%
Adult literacy rate (15 years and over)	Female 51% Male 75% Total 63%

The one thing that is clear from the graph above is that enough is not being to push for the speedy eradication of illiteracy in India. The status of the girl child has been a subject of much discussion, controversy and debate. Why the girl child is not receiving same facilities as their male counterparts. To answer this, let’s look at one common Indian proverb, ‘*raising girl is like watering someone else’s lawn*’. From the start, girl’s children are seen as burdens rather than blessings, which will eventually move into the homes of their husband. The deep rooted culture of male domination and lack of awareness is the main cause for female illiteracy. The result is low literacy rate among women in India.

When the Indian constitution was formulated, it granted equal rights to women, considering them legal citizens of the country and an equal to men in terms of freedom and opportunity. The sex ration of women at that time was slightly better than what it is today, standing at 945 females per 1000 males. Yet the conditions of women screamed a different reality. Though a number of constitutional amendments were made for women’s social economic and political benefits, yet they were never effective to bring a radical change in the situation.

India is developing but at a very slow rate, this is not the fault of a corrupt government; it is due to the problem of illiteracy only. Literacy enables a person to think rationally, to be understudying, to be more responsible and to make his own decisions. A literate person is aware of all his fundamental rights and duties. Literacy is the ultimate solution of fight problems like communalism, terrorism and under development. Our government is the of the people, for the people and by the people, but what is the use if people cannot even make the right choice?

So if we are to become a developed nation, the government should first remove the problem of illiteracy by introducing effective programs with proper implementation and budget. It is ironical that even today, our leaders and people’s of representatives give literacy a very low priority , putting poverty alleviation, food, clothing, shelter, work, health etc above it. They fail to perceived literacy as part of the development process. Neglecting the issue of illiteracy can hurt the development of India very badly.

Strategies adopted by the government for increasing female literacy-**• Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)-**

The government of India introduced a new scheme called Beti Bachao Beti Padhao on 22 January 2015 in Panipat in Haryana, which will help in generating awareness and improving the efficiency of delivery of welfare services meant for women with an initial corpus of Rs 100 crores. The Beti Bachao Beti padhao scheme is for survival, protection and education of the girl child. The prime objectives of this program are to bring a change in people mindset towards girl child on or after her birth. This is indeed a new and innovative step taken by the government of India to improve the condition of women in the society. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao programme is one step towards empowering girls through education. The objectives of the scheme are-

1. Prevent gender biased sex selective elimination
2. Ensure survival and protection of the girl child
3. Ensure education of the girl child

There is a long term strategy of the government to accelerate the efforts. According to women and child development minister Maneka Gandhi, central government will launch a mega scheme for saving and educating the girl child.

• Contribution of literacy campaigns to female literacy-

The provision of educational opportunities for women has been an important part of the national endeavour in the field of education since India's independence. The government of India launched the national literacy mission in 1988 for eradication of adult illiteracy. The mission of this national literacy campaigns is to create an environment where women demand knowledge and information, empowering themselves to change their lives, spread the message that education of women is a precondition for fighting against their oppression and also highlight the plight of the girl child and stress the need for universalisation of elementary education as a way of addressing the issue. The 1992 education policy envisaged free and compulsory elementary education of satisfactory quality to all children up to the age of 14 before India entered the 21st century. The Supreme Court in its 1993 ruling held that children had a fundamental right to free education.

• Heightened social awareness-

Literacy campaigns have heightened social awareness among women regarding the importance of education, both for themselves as well as for their children. Large numbers of women have been participated whole heartedly in the literacy campaigns as learners and volunteers. Because of the campaign mode and creation of a positive environment for literacy, women receive a social sanction to participate in the literacy programs. The literacy campaigns have given women an opportunity to break the isolation which is socially structured into their lives, giving them a chance to meet other women and learn collectively rather than learn singly as individuals. The newly acquired literacy skills have enhanced their ability to solve family problems and learn new skills. Literacy campaigns have also played a significant role in improving the status of women within their own families.

• Increased girls enrolment in primary, secondary and higher education

The literacy campaigns have also motivated and encouraged women learners to educate their children, particularly girls by enrolling them in formal schools. The need to provide equal opportunity to both girls and boys has also effect of generating greater demand for the quantity and quality of primary schooling. Primary and secondary education can bring literacy to the women but real empowerment will come from higher education in different fields. Higher education is the key which will bring women to the role of decision maker and that will also enshrine them with real empowerment. So we need to focus on these fields.

• Gender equity

There is a wide gender disparity in the literacy rate in India. The constitution not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Literacy campaigns have actively promoted gender equity and have sought to empower them as to decision making about themselves, their families and their communities. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. The national commission for women was set up by an act of parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. As a result of higher participation of women in literacy campaigns, the gender gap in literacy level is gradually getting reduced.

• Health and Hygiene-

Literacy campaigns in most districts have taken up health and hygiene issues as an internal component of adult education programs. Literacy campaigns have helped to spread knowledge about health care and nutrition, thereby enabling mothers to keep their family in better health and to care better for their children. Literacy campaigns have also disseminated information for creating awareness about problems of early marriage, spacing and small family norms. Healthy and educated women are more likely to have healthier and more educated children.

• The girl star project-

This is a series of films which documents stories of girls from the most disadvantaged communities across five northern states who, through attaining education, have managed to break the shackles of socio-economic constraints to make a success of their lives and become self sufficient. These young women have grown to become role models in their communities, who inspire younger girls to go to school and continue their education. The selection of characters for the films is from ordinary rural settings which the masses can identify with. These short films will be used as a tool at different levels- To motivated parents to ensure that their daughters go to school and do not drop out.

The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* programme for universalisation of primary education and the *Mahila Samakhya* programme which has set up alternative learning centres for imparting education and providing empowering skills to girls from disadvantaged communities are among the major initiatives to improve literacy levels.

Conclusion

Not only the government but every literate citizen should contribute in battling with the demon of illiteracy. Our motto should be “each one teach one”, If we are to become a developed nation. One of the initiatives is “teach india”, whose aim is to provide a platform to educate Indians to provide assistance in basic education to the unprivileged children. “Teach india” will connect educated individuals with the specialist education provides. It’s now turn of the youth to step up and take the responsibility on their shoulders to take this nation towards the light of literacy. In the word of the new president of United States, Barak Obama “*change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we have been waiting for. We are the change that we seek*”. The time for the change is now. There is need to redefine the status and role of women. There is a need to formulate reducing feminized poverty, promoting education of women, and prevention and elimination of violence against women.

The government as well as NGOs has been working on solving this problem of how we can eradicate illiteracy in India for both children and female.

Today modern women are so deft and self sufficient that she can be easily called a superwoman. Women are now fiercely ambitious and are providing their metal not only on the home front but also their respective professions. Women in Indian are coming up in all spheres of life. They are joining the universities and colleges in large numbers. They are entering into all kind of professions like engineering, medicine, politics, teaching etc. A nation progress and prosperity and be judge by the way it treats its women folk.

With increasing literacy among women in India, they get entry into many types of work. Women can now look upon the bearing and rising of their children not as a life’s work in itself but as an episode. Educating women uplifts her life as well as the quality of her life and her entire family. It is a fact that any educated women will definitely support the education of her children especially a girl child and provide a better guidance to her children.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, “*Educate one man, you educate one person, but educate a woman, you educate a whole civilization.*”

Gandhi believed women could do much to transform India on all levels. Today let us pledge to create an atmosphere of equality for the girl child. Let’s work together to remove this menace from society. We have a long way to go, but we will get there someday.

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