

COMMUNICATION

TRIBAL ECONOMY AND SPATIAL PATTERN OF LITERACY IN MEGHALAYA : A BLOCK LEVEL ANALYSIS

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Introduction

Human resources constitute the ultimate basis for the wealth of nations. The principal institutional mechanism for developing human skills and knowledge is the formal education system (Ghosh: 1985). It is the key factor for the rapid development within a country.

Diffusion of literacy and education among all sections of the population of a country is a basic requirement for pulling out the people from ignorance and backwardness and for the country's socio-economic advancement (Gosal; 1988). For ages, education in India was regarded as an exclusive preserve of the upper most stratum in the traditionally caste-ridden society. Those who had an access to education exploited it as means of making the individual accept and conform to the hierarchic structure of the society and completely subordinate his individuality to it (Desai, 1966). Among the huge population in India the scheduled community has not responded to literacy very enthusiastically.

The scheduled tribes belong to the chunk of India's population generally perceived as deprived in terms of social development. However, the tribal deprivation is a class in itself and is not comparable to the deprivation of other segments of population such as scheduled castes or other women. It is not a sub-set of the general deprivation since it has emanated from an entirely different social and historical context (Ahmad, 1982). The structure of literacy among the tribal community is unique and are not analogous to that of the general population. As compared to the all India level of 43.6 per cent (Census

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of India, 1991), the states of North East India generally show a much higher level of literacy rate. According to Prem Sagar (1991) the literacy differentials among the tribal and the non-tribal segments is substantially low in Christian dominated tribal belt of the North-East India. A relatively higher level of literacy with low level of economic development in the region raises some fundamental questions pertaining to the relationship between the two variables.

Keeping in view the above discussion, the present study makes an attempt to get an insight into the problems of literacy in Meghalaya. The following broad objectives are placed before the study:

- (i) to understand the extent of spatial variation in literacy rates among the people of Meghalaya
- (ii) to get an insight into the nature of occupational diversity
- (iii) to examine the role of economic structure in influencing the literacy attainment of the people.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for the present study is descriptive in nature and relates to an understanding of the constraints on literacy level of the population of the state of Meghalaya.

In order to calculate the literacy rate at the block level the percentage of literate has been obtained taking the total population into account. On the other hand the occupational structure that is the total agricultural workers in percentage have been collected for the block level taking the total main workers into consideration.

In order to analyze the relationship that exists between the literacy and occupational structure, a correlational matrix has been obtained taking six variables into account as given below:

1. Percentage of total literate
2. Percentage of male literate
3. Percentage of female literate
4. Percentage of total agricultural workers
5. Percentage of male agricultural workers.
6. Percentage of female agricultural workers

The correlational matrix has been obtained for the block level data. Percentage of literate as well as agricultural workers have been obtained for

male, female, rural and urban segment of the population for the two consecutive years.

Literacy in Meghalaya : *Generalities*

The spread of literacy is undoubtedly one of the most important parameters of social and cultural development among the tribal societies. The socio-cultural changes among the tribal groups can be understood in the light of the levels of literacy and education. The lower the level of literacy, the lesser is the contact and interaction with the non-tribal groups and the lower is the social and cultural development (Ahmad, 1982). It is in this background that the present research promises to explore and depict the literacy level of the tribal population of Meghalaya at the aggregate as also within the rural and urban components of the population.

The level of literacy of the population of Meghalaya during the last three decades shows a generally upward trend (Table 1).

TABLE 1 — MEGHALAYA : DECADAL VARIATION IN LITERACY RATE- 1971-91

Census year	Total population	%Literate		
		Total	Male	Female
1971	1011699	29.49	32.05	28.10
1981	1335819	34.06	37.90	30.10
1991	1774778	38.21	41.70	36.50

The 1971 census enumerated over a quarter (around 29.50%) of the population as literate compared to all India average of 30.78 per cent (Census of India; 1971) reflecting a close resemblance with the aggregate figure. However, more males were literate compared to those of the females. The share of the literate segment increased to a little over one third (34.06 per cent) of the total population by the year 1981, but the male-female disparity in literacy attainment not only continued to persist but also widened significantly. The literate segment constituted around 38 per cent of the total population of the state by the year 1991. Interestingly, however, in spite of the fact that more males were literate than the females, the gap between the literate males and females seemed to reduce marginally. The narrowing of the male-female differentials in recent years is due perhaps to the high percentage of Christian population which lives in a relatively liberal social setup, permits outdoor activities of females and thus increases the literacy rate among them (Sagar, 1991).

The increase in the literacy level in each decade could also be the result of the initiatives taken by many governmental as well as voluntary organisations who are working with the objective of educating tribes through special educational programmes.

It is evident from Table 2 that there is hardly any difference in the literacy rates of the population living in the rural areas from the ones observed at the state level. In fact, the rural segment of the population is the true representative, especially in the tribal states like Meghalaya. The rural literacy rate remains well above the national average.

TABLE 2 — DECADAL VARIATION OF RURAL AND URBAN LITERACY RATE IN MEGHALAYA

Census year	Percentage of Rural Literate Population			Percentage of Urban Literate Population		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
	1971	23.40	27.683	18.94	65.22	69.93
1981	27.45	0.83	23.96	64.12	68.90	58.82
1991	31.48	34.50	28.36	67.65	71.37	63.55

In broad correspondence with the general pattern of literacy in the country, literacy in urban areas of Meghalaya remains high in all the decades (Table 2). The increase in the literacy rate is more prominent in the rural areas compared to urban areas in terms of aggregate as well as in the case of male and female segments. The general increase in the literacy level in the rural areas is due to the establishment of educational institutions by the Christian missionaries. The incentives provided by the government in terms of scholarships to the scheduled tribe also helps to increase the literacy level among these backward and isolated groups.

Literacy in Meghalaya-block level pattern

The block level pattern indicates the disparity in the level of literacy in 1981 and 1991. There were 31 community development blocks (C.D. Block) in Meghalaya according to 1981 census which, however, reduced to 30 C.D. Blocks in 1991. In 1991, the West Resubalpara C.D. Block was included with the Dadenggiri C.D. Block.

The above table reveals that the spatial variation in the levels of literacy gets further accentuated when the data is analyzed at block level. The increase in the proportion of literate from 1981 to 1991 appears to be substantial. Around a fifth of all the blocks (19.35 per cent) had more than 35

per cent literate population in 1981, while over two-fifth of the blocks recorded a similar literacy rate in 1991.

TABLE 3 — INTER CD BLOCK VARIATION IN LITERACY ATTAINMENT (1981-91)

% Literate	No. of C.D. Blocks		% of C.D. Blocks	
	1981	1991	1981	1991
Above 35	6	13	19.35	43.33
30-35	7	7	22.58	23.33
25-30	8	6	25.81	20.00
20-25	4	4	12.90	13.33
Less than 20	6	0	19.35	0.0

There was a general increase in the proportion of literate in nearly all over the state. This is evident from the absence of any block in the literacy category of less than 20 per cent in 1991. The year 1981 on the other hand recorded as many as 6 blocks, constituting around a fifth of all the blocks, containing literate population less than 20 per cent each.

Figure 2.1 and 2.2 reveal that most of the blocks where literacy rate is low are (less than 25%) confined to Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills (mainly the adjacent districts of Assam and Bangladesh). The community development blocks located in Khasi Hills generally show a much better response to literacy drive. The pattern remains by and large identical in both the years. However, the only striking feature is the literacy level of Mawkynrew C.D. Block showing a remarkable increase in the proportion of literate during the 1981-1991 decade.

TABLE 4 — INTER CD BLOCK VARIATION IN MALE LITERACY RATE 1981-1991

% of Male Literate	No. of Blocks		% of Blocks	
	1981	1991	1981	1991
Above 25	1	2	3.23	6.67
20-25	5	8	16.13	26.67
15-30	13	16	41.94	53.33
10-15	10	3	32.26	10.00
Less than 10	2	1	6.45	3.33

A cursory glance at the above table indicates that only a single block has a male literacy level above 25 per cent in 1981. In a majority of blocks, only 10

to 20 per cent males are literate. The highest male literacy rate is confined to the Myllem Block of East Khasi Hills and the lowest literate percentage is found in Laskein C.D. Block of Jaintia Hills districts and Mawkynrew C.D. Block of East Khasi Hills. In general, blocks with high level of literacy correspond to medium to high percentage of male literate. The only exception is found in Mawryngkneng C.D. Block of East Khasi Hills district which has a literacy rate as high as 30.78 per cent whereas the male literacy rate is as low as 14.38 per cent.

In 1991 (Table 4) the majority of the blocks recorded 15 to 20 per cent males as literate. A little over a quarter of the blocks recorded a male literacy level between 20 to 25 per cent, whereas more than a quarter of the male population was literate in only two blocks. On the other hand, less than 15 per cent males is literate in over 13 per cent blocks. Relatively higher proportion of males are literate in two blocks namely Myllem (East Khasi Hills) and Rongram (West Garo Hills) C.D. Blocks which incidentally has high level of urbanization too (Fig. 3.1).

TABLE 5 — BLOCKWISE FEMALE LITERACY LEVEL 1981-1991

% of Female Literate	No. of Blocks		% of Blocks	
	1981	1991	1981	1991
Above 25	1	1	3.23	3.33
20-25	0	2	0.0	6.67
15-30	9	11	29.03	36.67
10-15	11	12	35.55	40.00
Less than 10	10	4	32.26	13.33

The female literacy rate in almost all the blocks are very low which is rather surprising in a state characterized by matrilineal social order. It is evident from the above table that with the exception of one block where over a quarter of the population is literate, in the majority of the blocks less than 15 per cent (both in 1981 and 1991) of the female population is capable of reading and writing.

A comparison of the spatial pattern in literacy during the period 1981 and 1991 leads to some generalities that can be summarised as (i) Myllem C.D. Block, where the capital of the state is located, has a high share of literate population. The diffusion of literacy is all encompassing as evident from an analysis of aggregate, male and female segment of the population. (ii) There is a broad correspondence between aggregate and male literacy pattern.

(iii) Blocks such as Mawryngkneng C.D. Block of East Khasi Hills along with Laskein and Khliehriat C.D. Blocks of Jaintia Hills have more female literate compared to that among the males. (iv) 4 blocks in 1981 and 9 blocks in 1991 have almost equal share of literacy level among the males and the females. (v) The increase in the share of literacy level is very prominent in 1991. (vi) Blocks which have the presence of urban centres, generally tend to have high literacy level. (vii) Nongpoh and Chokpot C.D. block do not show much increase in the literacy level. (viii) There are as many as 11 and 18 blocks, which have not registered any increase in male and female literacy level respectively.

It is evident that the spatial pattern in the spread of literacy is highly fragmented over space and is generally responding to impulses of urbanization. It is the varying response of the female segment of the population which causes spatial variation in literacy.

Occupation structure

The discussion of occupational structure of a community is very important in socio-economic studies. In fact occupational composition is an important consideration as a factor in educability.

Table 6 makes it clear that over 40 per cent of all the blocks have more than 90 per cent of the main workers engaged in the agricultural sector according to 1981 census. But there is a decrease in the number of such blocks (in the category above 90 per cent) in the year 1991 indicating some structural shift in the economy. These changes may be due to the increasing contacts of the tribal communities with people from plains along with the special attention of governmental and non-governmental agencies towards the development of tribal communities and tribal areas (Raha, 1989). Nevertheless, there has been some decline in the dependence on agriculture.

TABLE 6 — BLOCKWISE OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE 1981-1991

% of Agricultural Workers	No. of Blocks		% of Blocks	
	1981	1991	1981	1991
Above 90	13	6	41.94	20.00
70-90	10	16	32.26	53.33
50-70	3	2	9.68	6.67
30-50	3	2	9.68	6.67
Less than 30	2	4	6.45	13.33

Correspondingly, there has been a notable increase in the number of blocks where the dependence on agriculture is low. Nonetheless, the proportion of agricultural workers continues to be high (above 70%) in most of the blocks even in 1991 as 22 out of a total of 30 blocks come under this category. The change towards non-agricultural dependence is rather imperceptible.

Occupation and literacy : A correlational analysis at block level

Literacy as is well known depends mainly upon the economic condition of the people. It is positively correlated with the economic changes of any society. Higher literacy rate leads to significant economic development and social change and *vice versa*. Every aspect of economic growth brings with it a need for more education and more trained personnel (Sopher, 1980). In this respect, it may be worthwhile to examine the relationship between literacy level and occupational structure in Meghalaya (Table 7a).

TABLE 7a — CORRELATIONAL ANALYSIS OF LITERACY AND OCCUPATION AT BLOCK LEVEL 1981

Total literate	Male literate	Female literate	Total agri. workers	Male agri. workers	Female agri. workers
1	0.9517	0.9384	-0.4932	-0.5216	-0.3419
		0.7871	-0.3499	-0.3619	-0.2426
		1	-0.5978	-0.6418	-0.4144
			1	0.9402	0.8599
				1	0.6430
					1

It is clear from the above matrix that there exists a negative relationship between literacy and agricultural workforce. However, this relationship is very weak in the case of female agricultural workers. Male literacy rate and their agricultural participation too shows a negative relationship. It is highly interesting that a high positive association is observed between total agricultural workers on the other. This is due to the prevalence of a tribal social order permitting women to join their male counterparts in agricultural activity on equal terms.

Even in the year 1991, the relationship between agricultural participation and literacy attainment reveals a negative relationship. At the block level, it is clear that agricultural participation is a negative factors in attaining literacy. This is true for both males and females. However, the negative relation is far stronger in the case of males.

TABLE 7B — CORRELATIONAL ANALYSIS OF LITERACY AND OCCUPATION AT BLOCK LEVEL 1991

Total literate	Male literate	Female literate	Total agri. workers	Male agri. workers	Female agri. workers
1	0.9437	0.9281	-0.4579	-0.5361	-0.4085
	1	0.7528	-0.3409	-0.3693	-0.2856
		1	-0.5275	-0.6513	-0.4913
			1	0.9137	0.9033
				1	0.8761
					1

Conclusion

From the above discussion of literacy as an independent component at the block level, the following broad conclusions may be mentioned.

- (1) Literacy rate at the state level in Meghalaya is showing a marked increase since 1971. This is true of both male as well as female component of population both in rural and urban areas.
- (2) Urbanization seems to be a positive factor in enhancing literacy.
- (3) In Jaintia Hills the female literacy rate is more than the male literacy rate.
- (4) The responses of the female segments to literacy is far more varied than the males.

If the two components i.e. is the literacy map as well as occupation map are compared with one another, the relationship or the influence of one on the other can be easily observed.

The following points emerge from the analysis.

- (1) In Jaintia Hills, the blocks with low level of literacy has a high percentage of agricultural workers in two blocks but in contrast to it in the other blocks of this district there is a high literacy rate and also a high percentage of agricultural workers.
- (2) The literacy rate as well as agricultural workers are high in all the blocks of West Khasi Hills.
- (3) In Garo Hills the low literacy rate leads to the share of high percentage of agricultural workers.

- (4) In the East Khasi Hills mainly the southern blocks have low agricultural workers and high literacy level.

In conclusion, it may be stated that the literacy pattern is much complex and does not show any definite relationship with occupational structure. The mapped evidence and the correlational exercise does not correspond to each other indicating the operation of highly localized socio-economic and cultural factors. It may thus be worthwhile to analyze the data at much lower level of spatial aggregation to get further insights into the patterns of literacy and its determinants. In this regard, a highly culture-specific study may be highly desirable.

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