

GENDER, CASTE AND DISCRIMINATION : A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE PATTERN OF LITERACY AMONG THE SCHEDULED CASTE WOMEN OF ORISSA

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Introduction

The Social order of India today is characterized by inherent disparities and discrimination that needs little elaboration. The problem is further complicated by the process of development which is highly uneven and lopsided both in its regional spread and its effects on different social groups. It is a pity that the "slow pace of development has not led to a total transformation of the social order in India as in the case of Western Europe and North America" (Ahmad: 1992, 2). Moreover, the social formations in India are so rigidly defined that they determine everything else including the pace and direction of economic development. It is this rigidly defined social structure that often reinforces the very disparities which the five-decade long developmental policy in India has striven to eliminate. The internal contradictions of the social order continue almost unchanged despite many efforts to the contrary. A very potent institution that has defied all developments in India is the institution of caste which changes its form to adjust to new situations. According to Ahmad, "Caste which should have been a forgotten legend by now continues to be a distinctive expression of identity of millions of men and women in this country. It determines patterns of social interaction, defines the configuration of political power and regulates access to social authority. Over the last forty-five years of independence its venom has entered the body politic of India in myriad ways and its social, economic and cultural ramifications are not easily discernible... over the forty five years of independence, caste has not only widened its area of influence, it has acquired a volatile character which poses a major threat to the social security of the weaker sections of our people." (Ahmad: 1993, 17).

Historically the caste system of India has been responsible for creating a deprived and depressed class of people who have been unable to gain access to the developmental initiatives undertaken after the independence. Bulk, if not all, of the people belonging to the Scheduled Castes has been a victim to this form of discrimination as the institutional frame of caste has operated through history as a constraint on the freedom of an individual.

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If the people belonging to the Scheduled Castes were (and still are) a victim of discrimination, the women belonging to these sections were doubly so. On the one hand they were discriminated on account of their caste status and on the other, they were discriminated on gender lines. If the social order relegated the Scheduled Caste people to the periphery, the gender discrimination forced the women belonging to these sections to perpetual marginalization and subordination. This is historically valid, but has the situation changed in contemporary India? The extent to which the Scheduled Caste women have benefited from the drives towards universal education may hold the key to the answer. The present paper proposes to examine the disparities in the levels of literacy attained by the Scheduled Caste women of Orissa.

Literacy is considered important as it plays or should play a crucial role in the process of social transformation as it paves the way for attainment of the objectives of social development. There were historically determined constraints on the universal spread of literacy and of education in Indian society even before independence. Spread of literacy stemmed from the primary edifice of social stratification inherent in caste prejudices. The social system based on caste was responsible for the birth of the principle of segregation and was so deterministic that it forced an individual to subordinate his individuality to "the institutionalized framework of social inequality and discrimination in conjunction with variation in income distribution engendered vast disparities not only in access to the institution of formal learning but also in the levels of educational attainment of the different segments of the Indian people" (Ahmad: 1985). This has led Cippola to remark that while "the art of writing spread around the world across geographical and cultural borders and adopted to a variety of languages, it hardly filtered down through social stratification" (Cippola: 1969). It may hardly be emphasized the Scheduled Castes were not only alienated from the institutions of formal learning, but also from the means of production; engendering economic inequity while retaining the landless working classes as a specimen of disguised slavery. The institution of class division universal to all agrarian society but caste system emerged only in India to become so rigid that it could hardly be altered or even challenged. Thus the social system based on caste operated as a constraint on the universal spread of education and curtailed the capability of education to make significant impact on the Scheduled Castes which remained by and large outside the ambit of institutionalized learning.

Given this socially evolved deprivation which the depressed castes had to shoulder as a burden, the women belonging to this segment had to bear the brunt

as they became a victim of double discrimination - as part of caste inequity on the one hand and as part of gender inequity on the other. Their position in the society and within the family made them the worst victims of a social system which relegated them to complete insignificance. It is no wonder that, the Scheduled Caste women in India today occupy a position in the ladder of littermates only a shade better than their Scheduled Tribe counterpart - a segment which also shares similar discrimination though emanating from a different socio-historical context.

The extent of discrimination and deprivation to which the Scheduled Caste women are subjected to is empirically examined in this paper in the context of Orissa - a state which supports a sizeable proportion of the Scheduled Castes and as many as 93 castes belonging to the Scheduled category. Although Orissa is not known for much caste conflict, this itself is an indication of their pitiable condition which has not permitted it to develop into an organized class. The state has been selected as a case study as it is characterized by regional backwardness of a high order.

Spatial Distribution

At the aggregate level, the Scheduled Castes in 1991 constitute 16.20 per cent of the total population of Orissa, a proportion close to their representation at the national level. However, there is wide regional variation in their share as revealed from an inter-district comparison of their proportion (Table 1).

Table 1

Orissa : Inter-District Variation in the Proportion of the Scheduled Castes (%), 1991

State/District	Total	Rural	Urban
Orissa	16.20	16.70	13.00
Sambalpur	17.48	17.62	16.79
Sundargarh	8.78	8.47	9.39
Kendujhar	11.49	11.07	14.44
Mayurbhanj	6.99	6.71	11.24
Baleswar	19.81	20.78	10.49
Cuttack	20.36	21.34	13.30
Chenkanal	16.43	16.74	13.57
Phulbani	18.74	18.66	19.97
Bolangir	17.27	17.46	15.41
Kalahandi	15.86	15.84	16.22
Koraput	15.01	14.75	17.06
Ganjam	16.59	17.24	12.89
Puri	15.45	16.72	10.25

Source : Census of India, 1991, Primary Census Abstract, Part-II-B(i), Vol. II.

The Scheduled Castes constitute a little less than one-fifth (over 17%) of the total population in Cuttack, Baleswar, Phulbani, Sambalpur and Bolangir districts, while their proportion is between 5-16 per cent in Ganjam, Dhenkanal, Kalahandi, Puri and Koraput districts. However, the presence of these castes in the tribal dominated districts of Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh and Kendujhar is much less conspicuous as evident from low their concentration in these districts ranging between 6-11 per cent in each. The Scheduled Caste population is generally associated with agriculture and this explains their high concentration in the coastal areas and districts supporting intensive agriculture. On the other hand, they have a marginal presence in the hilly areas.

It is interesting that the proportion of the Scheduled Castes in the urban areas of Cuttack and Baleswar districts is very low indicating their greater concentration in the rural areas. This is true of other coastal districts like Ganjam and Puri too. On the other hand, the Scheduled Tribes have a relatively larger presence in the urban areas in the hilly districts (Table 1).

Inter-District Variation in Literacy Rates

As per 1991 Census records, nearly 50 per cent (49.08%) of the total population in Orissa is literate. As is expected, the coastal districts contain much greater literate population than the districts located in the hilly areas. For example, the literate population in the coastal districts of Puri and Cuttack constitutes over 63 per cent of the population, while in Baleswar their proportion is 58.78 per cent. Ganjam located in the coastal areas seems to be an exception where only around 44 per cent of the population is literate. In the tribal dominated hilly districts, the proportion of the literate is very low, i.e., ranging between 20-40 per cent. Included in this category are Mayurbhanj, Phulbani, Bolangir, Kalahandi and Koraput districts. Only Sundargarh seems to be an exception. It is amply evident that the districts supporting a greater proportion of the Scheduled Caste population also record a higher proportion of literates.

But this does not mean that a large proportion of the Scheduled Caste people is literate. It is interesting that inter-district variation in the proportion of literates is much less pronounced indicating a greater disparity in literacy rates attained by the aggregate population and the Scheduled Caste population (Table 2). The literates among the Scheduled Castes are relatively more in districts where their numerical strength is not substantial, particularly in the western hilly tracts.

Table 2

Orissa : Inter-District Variation in Literacy Rates (in %), 1991

State/District	Total	Scheduled Caste		
		Total	Rural	Urban
Orissa	49.08	36.8	35.48	47.80
Sambalpur	49.37	38.31	36.90	45.50
Sundargarh	52.97	43.86	39.38	52.00
Kendujhar	47.73	43.67	42.80	48.36
Mayurbhanj	37.88	30.63	29.60	40.02
Baleswar	58.78	39.92	39.57	46.42
Cuttack	63.28	42.42	41.35	54.58
Dhenkanal	53.21	35.44	34.04	51.26
Phulbani	38.90	32.62	31.30	52.18
Bolangir	39.73	33.64	31.45	49.96
Kalahandi	30.05	27.53	26.45	42.81
Koraput	22.66	23.85	21.91	37.15
Ganjam	44.26	27.52	25.97	39.26
Puri	63.82	43.88	42.52	52.93

Source : Computed by author from Census of India, 1991, Primary Census Abstract, Part-II-B(i), Vol. II.

It is interesting that literacy rate is more among the Scheduled Castes in Koraput compared to the rates attained by the aggregate population. Likewise in Mayurbhanj, Phulbani, Bolangir and Kalahandi districts, the proportion of literates among the Scheduled Caste segment is only a little less than that of the aggregate population. It is clear that the Scheduled Caste population, in areas of larger concentration of their population have not been able to respond to literacy drives as much as their counterparts living in the hilly areas.

Rural-Urban Differential in the Scheduled Caste Literacy

In general, the literacy rate among the Scheduled Caste population lags behind the rate achieved by their counterparts living in urban areas (Table 3). A very large proportion of the urban Scheduled Caste people

Table 3

Orissa : Inter-District Variation in the Scheduled Caste Female Literacy Rate (in %), 1991

State/District	Overall	Rural	Urban	Rural-Urban Differential
Orissa	20.74	19.39	32.30	13.09
Sambalpur	21.32	19.77	29.47	9.70
Sundargarh	28.15	23.77	36.58	12.81
Kendujhar	25.65	24.73	30.80	6.07
Mayurbhanj	17.84	16.74	28.07	11.33
Baleswar	23.79	23.41	31.21	7.80
Cuttack	26.92	25.79	40.60	14.81
Dhenkanal	18.07	16.68	34.53	17.85
Phulbani	14.07	12.96	30.70	17.74
Bolangir	15.54	13.98	32.31	18.33
Kalahandi	11.54	10.44	27.00	16.56
Koraput	12.38	10.66	24.05	13.39
Ganjam	11.38	9.85	23.09	13.24
Puri	27.24	25.67	38.46	12.79

Source: Computed by author from Census of India, 1991, Primary Census Abstract, Part-II-B(i), Vol. II.

is literate (over 50%) in the coastal districts of Cuttack, Puri and Dhenkanal as well as in the western hilly districts of Sundargarh and Phulbani. On the other hand, the literacy rate in the urban segment is much lower in the coastal district of Ganjam and in Koraput district located in the hills.

There are wide gaps between the rural and urban areas as far as the Scheduled Caste female literacy is concerned. The differentials are as high as 15-18 percentage points in Bolangir, Phulbani, Dhenkanal and Kalahandi while it is low in Sambalpur, Kendujhar and Baleswar. It is evident that the rural-urban disparity is greater in districts where the Scheduled Caste female literacy is lower.

Male Female Differential

Males among the Scheduled Castes are invariably much more literate compared to their female counterparts. The male literacy rate varies between 35.21 per cent in Koraput to 61.29 per cent in Kendujhar showing wide inter-district variation. On the contrary, the variation in female segment is much lower ranging between 11.38 per cent in Ganjam and 28.15 per cent in Sundargarh. A uniformly low level of literacy among the Scheduled Caste women thus leads to a high male-female differential in most districts (Table 4). It is interesting that the areas of high Scheduled Caste concentration (viz., Baleswar, Cuttack, Phulbani and Bolangir) contain relatively smaller proportion of literates among both males and females compared to districts where their proportion is lower. It is remarkable that with the possible exception of Koraput where the overall literacy rate for both males and females is low, the male-female differential is by and large uniform in all the districts ranging between 30-35 percentage points.

Table 4

Orissa : Inter-District Variation in Male-Female Differential in Literacy among the Scheduled Castes

State/District	Overall	Rural	Urban
Orissa	31.68	31.83	29.80
Sambalpur	33.64	34.06	31.16
Sundargarh	30.57	30.97	29.04
Kendujhar	35.64	30.92	33.83
Mayurbhanj	30.73	31.03	27.50
Baleswar	31.72	30.84	29.01
Cuttack	30.36	30.62	26.14
Dhenkanal	34.03	34.13	31.62
Phulbani	36.95	36.56	41.85
Bolangir	34.58	34.56	34.55
Kalahandi	32.03	32.05	31.80
Koraput	22.83	22.36	26.16
Ganjam	32.61	32.61	32.33
Puri	32.69	33.39	26.88

Source: Computed by author from Census of India, 1991, Primary Census Abstract, Part-II-B(i), Vol. II.

The extent of disparity in male-female disparity is marginally lower in the urban areas of all districts except in Kendujhar, Phulbani and Koraput, where the response of urban Scheduled Caste females to literacy is rather very poor (Table 4).

Scheduled Caste Female Literacy and Literacy among Other Categories of Women

It is evident from Table 5 that the response to literacy drive is exceedingly low among the Scheduled Caste females compared to women belonging to other categories. It is only the women among the Scheduled Tribes whose performance is worse than that of the Scheduled Caste women. At the aggregate level, it is the urban women who have displayed a satisfactory level of literacy. Over 60 per cent (61.18%) of all women in urban areas are literate. Excepting Kalahandi, 50-70 per cent women living in urban areas are literate.

The overall literacy rate among women falls rapidly to only 34.67 per cent. This drastic fall in literacy rate can be easily explained as it includes the literacy rate achieved by the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women as well as female literates in the rural areas whose level of literacy remains abysmally poor.

It is interesting that the Scheduled Caste women in the urban areas display a relatively better response towards literacy. A little less than 33 per cent urban Scheduled Caste women are literate at the state level, with an inter - district variation that ranges from 23.09 per cent in Ganjam to 40.60 per cent in Cuttack. The literacy rate among the urban Scheduled Caste women is very close to the rate achieved by the women living in rural areas; though the rate is lower in the latter case. Literacy rate among the rural women, however, reveals wide inter-district variation (Table 5).

The proportion of urban Scheduled Tribe women is only next to rural females. Scheduled Caste rural women display a much lower literacy rate (i.e., 20.71%) and is lower to even the rate displayed by the Scheduled Tribe women living in the urban areas. The proportion of literates among the rural Scheduled Caste women is only marginally lower compared to the rate achieved by their aggregate population. The position of the Scheduled Tribe women both at aggregate level and in the rural areas is even worse compared to the Scheduled Caste women.

It is evident that it is the rural Scheduled Caste women who have benefited little from literacy drive and continue to remain vastly illiterate. It is however, interesting that the response of the Scheduled Caste women is relatively better

in Kendujhar, Baleswar and Cuttack districts compared to the Scheduled Tribe women.

Literacy Rate among Different Sections of Population

An attempt was made to compare literacy rates of Scheduled Caste women in relation to other segments of population. The entire population was divided into 27 categories (Appendix I) and literacy rates were calculated for each of these segments for all the districts of Orissa. Based on the rates, ranks were assigned to each of the segments based on their relative performance (Table 6).

It is evident from the rank analysis that the Scheduled Caste women invariably occupy a lower position in almost all districts, though there are significant inter-district variations. At the state level, the Scheduled Caste urban male literates occupy 4th position (literacy rate: 62.09%). The Scheduled Caste male and Scheduled Caste rural males occupied 9th and 10th rank whereas the Scheduled Caste urban literates ranked 11th. Scheduled Caste urban literates and Scheduled Caste literates occupied 14th and 15th rank respectively.

As far as the Scheduled Caste women are concerned, those in the urban areas held 19th rank whereas Scheduled Caste women (aggregate) and those living in the rural areas held 24th and 25th ranks respectively. It is amply evident that the women in general and the Scheduled Caste women in particular held very low rank among the 27 categories of population. Only the urban Scheduled Caste women seem to have somewhat escaped this fate by their better performance in literacy.

The position of the Scheduled Caste women in terms of their response to literacy is well understood by the fact that there is little inter-district variation in the ranks held by these groups.

The only exceptions seem to be in the districts of Kendujhar and Koraput where the literacy rate among different sections of Scheduled Caste population is relatively better. Likewise, some coastal districts seem to have shown a better performance as far as the Scheduled Caste female literacy is concerned. These districts are Cuttack and Baleswar.

In any case, the Scheduled Caste women, both at aggregate level as well as in the rural areas not only hold lower ranks in literacy level, the inter-district variation too is minimal. The relative deprivation of the Scheduled Caste women, as evident from the rank analysis, seems to be greater in Sambalpur, Sundargarh,

Table 5
Orissa: Inter-District Comparison in Literacy Rates among Different Categories of women (in %), 1991

State/District	Urban Females	Females (Aggregate)	SC Urban Female	Rural Females	ST Urban Females	SC Females	SC Rural Females	ST Female	ST Rural Female
Orissa	61.18	34.67	32.30	30.79	27.73	20.74	19.39	10.21	9.29
Sambalpur	55.37	33.55	29.47	29.79	26.07	21.32	19.77	16.09	15.25
Sundargarh	64.88	36.60	36.58	27.70	41.95	28.15	23.77	24.52	21.90
Kendujhar	51.09	30.01	30.80	27.18	18.53	25.65	24.73	11.74	11.26
Mayurbhanj	62.77	23.67	28.07	21.14	29.62	22.12	20.79	10.50	10.12
Baleswar	55.16	44.57	31.21	43.57	11.73	23.79	23.41	7.14	6.75
Cuttack	67.99	50.38	40.60	61.30	18.22	26.92	25.79	6.88	6.02
Dhenkanal	66.15	37.34	34.53	34.44	25.10	18.07	16.68	10.17	9.48
Phulbani	61.61	20.26	30.70	17.73	41.24	14.07	12.96	11.26	10.83
Bolangir	53.91	21.88	32.31	18.55	20.57	15.54	13.98	9.03	8.72
Kalahandi	47.09	14.55	27.00	12.38	17.93	11.54	10.44	5.38	5.20
Koraput	51.61	13.09	24.05	8.22	11.39	12.38	10.66	2.39	2.11
Ganjam	56.70	28.09	23.09	23.11	45.60	11.38	9.85	6.82	6.46
Puri	70.96	49.64	38.46	45.23	35.00	27.24	25.67	13.83	10.62

Mayurbhanj and Phulbani located in the western hilly region and Dhenkanal, Ganjam and Puri districts located in the coastal areas. It is also evident that this deprivation is all pervasive, i.e., it is not confined to females only or the Scheduled Caste women in the rural areas, but also their male counterparts as well as those living in the urban areas.

Inter-Community Variation in Female Literacy

A more refined way of examining literacy development among the Scheduled Caste women of Orissa may be to compare the literacy rates attained by the women belonging to different communities which have been listed under the schedule. There are as many as 93 Scheduled Caste communities in Orissa and their numerical strength varies greatly from a few dozen to more than a few lakhs. Table 7 reveals that there are only 15 communities which account for nearly 90 per cent of the total Scheduled Caste population. On the other hand, nearly 78 communities contain a little over 10 per cent of the total Scheduled Caste population of the state. This suggests that most of the Scheduled Caste communities are extremely small in population-size while a few of them are highly dominating as far as their numerical strength is concerned. Of the 15 large communities, the Pans are the most dominant and widespread and account for over one-fifth of the total Scheduled Caste population of the state. There are three more communities namely the Doms, The Gondas and the Dhobas, who together account for nearly a third of the total Scheduled Caste population. Around 16.8 per cent of total Scheduled Caste population consists of just two communities, namely the Bawris and the Kandaras. Moreover, about 19 per cent of the Scheduled Caste population consists of 9 communities of relatively smaller numerical strength of 1 to 5 per cent each.

Table 7
Inter-Community Variation in Female Literacy Rate

% Share in the Total S.c. population	No. of Scheduled Communities	Total Share in the Population (%)	Average Female Literacy (1981) (%)	Range (%)
> 20	1	20.9	8.90	—
10-20	3	32.6	9.00	11.95
5-10	2	16.8	9.40	8.48
1-5	9	18.9	9.40	12.93
<1	79	10.8	10.80	52.70

Source: computed by the author from Scheduled Castes, Population and Literates, by O.P. Sharma, Kar Kripa Publisher, New Delhi, 1990.

The variation in literacy rates achieved by the female segment belonging to these communities reveals interesting facts. Unfortunately the date pertains to the year 1981, as the 1991 Census is yet to publish literacy figures for individual (Scheduled) Caste groups. Nevertheless, Table 7 shows the pitiable condition of the Scheduled Caste women as far as their literacy status is concerned. What is even more intriguing is that the average literacy level attained by the women belonging to the dominant communities is extremely poor. Ironically, the average female literacy marginally improves among the communities which are much smaller in numerical strength. For example, only around 9 per cent of the females belonging to the Pan community, the most dominant and widespread Scheduled Caste community in Orissa, are able to read and write. The situation is by and large, the same with the Gonda, the Dom and the Dhoba communities though the last named community has a slightly better (16.03%) female literacy rate. Among the Bawris and the Kandaras, the average literacy rate is around 9.4 per cent, though the Kandara women seem to have responded better to literacy drive with a literacy rate as high as 13.68 per cent compared to the Bawri women who registered a literacy rate of only 5.20 per cent. Scheduled Caste communities whose numerical strength varies between 1 to 5 per cent, record a female literacy rate either similar or better than the rate achieved by communities with greater numerical strength. It is interesting that the average female literacy rate among the women belonging to numerically extremely small caste groups is marginally better at 10.8 per cent though the inter-community variation too is very high with a range as great as 52.70 per cent. In any case, it is clear that the female literacy rate among numerically strong communities continues to be pathetic while the females belonging to some of the small sized communities have responded relatively more enthusiastically to literacy. Even among the numerically smaller Scheduled Caste communities, with the exception of one community, the female literacy rate hardly exceeds 20 per cent.

Concluding Remarks

It was evident from the analysis that the Scheduled Caste women in Orissa continue to be unaffected by the fruits of literacy development to which other

segments of Orissa's population, including their male counterparts have responded positively. The all pervasiveness of their deprivation and discrimination is borne out by the fact that there is hardly any variation in the Scheduled Caste female literacy rate across geographical regions, or in terms of the concentration pattern in the distribution of the Scheduled Caste population. Even the large numerical strength of some of the Scheduled Caste population has had little impact on the literacy status of their female segment. The situation calls for concerted efforts to improve the lot of the Scheduled Caste population as a whole with programmes that are women-specific in form and content.

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Appendix I

List of Population Categories for which the Literacy Rates and the Ranks were Determined.

1. Overall Literates
2. Overall Male Literates
3. Overall Female Literates
4. Overall Rural Literates
5. Overall Urban Literates
6. Overall Male Rural Literates
7. Overall Female Rural Literates
8. Overall Male Urban Literates
9. Overall Female Urban Literates
10. Scheduled Caste Literates
11. Scheduled Caste Male Literates
12. Scheduled Caste Female Literates
13. Scheduled Caste Rural Literates
14. Scheduled Caste Urban Literates
15. Scheduled Caste Rural Male Literates

16. Scheduled Caste Rural Female Literates
17. Scheduled Caste Urban Male Literates
18. Scheduled Caste Urban Female Literates
19. Scheduled Tribe Literates
20. Scheduled Tribe Male Literates
21. Scheduled Tribe Female Literates
22. Scheduled Tribe Rural Literates
23. Scheduled Tribe urban Literates
24. Scheduled Tribe Rural Male Literates
25. Scheduled Tribe Rural Female Literates
26. Scheduled Tribe Urban Male Literates
27. Scheduled Tribe Urban Female Literates