

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY AMONG SCHEDULED CASTES IN INDIA: GENDERED LITERACY TRENDS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines gender disparities in literacy among Scheduled Castes in India data from 1961 to 2011. The study focuses on rural, urban, and combined literacy trends to understand the changing nature of educational inequality over six decades. Using a Sequential Explanatory Mixed Method Design, the research combines quantitative analysis of secondary data obtained from the Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India with qualitative insights gathered through in-depth interviews with Scheduled Caste women from rural communities. The findings reveal that although literacy rates among Scheduled Castes have improved significantly over time, substantial gender disparities continue to persist, particularly in rural areas. The analysis shows that the literacy gap between males and females widened steadily until 1991 and declined gradually thereafter; however, female literacy remained consistently lower than male literacy throughout the study period. The qualitative findings further indicate that poverty, patriarchal attitudes, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, limited educational infrastructure, and caste-based discrimination continue to restrict women's educational participation. The study highlights that educational inequality among Scheduled Castes cannot be understood solely through statistical indicators, as it is deeply embedded within broader socio-cultural and economic structures. The paper argues for more inclusive, gender-sensitive, and intersectional educational policies that address the lived realities of marginalized women. The study contributes to the fields of gender studies, sociology of education, and educational policy by

integrating longitudinal demographic analysis with grassroots experiences, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of literacy inequality among Scheduled Castes in India.

KEYWORDS: Gender Disparity, Scheduled Castes, Female Literacy, Educational Inequality

1. INTRODUCTION

Education has long been regarded as one of the most powerful instruments of social transformation and human development (Spiel et al., 2018). Beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills, education enables individuals to improve their quality of life, participate in democratic processes, and challenge systems of inequality and exclusion. (OECD, 2013) In modern societies, literacy is often considered the foundation of social progress, economic mobility, and empowerment. Nations with higher literacy rates generally experience better health outcomes, stronger civic participation, and greater social cohesion. (Murthy, 2012) In a diverse and stratified society like India, education plays an even more significant role in addressing historical disadvantages and creating opportunities for marginalized communities. It serves not only as a means of individual advancement but also as a pathway toward social justice and inclusive development. (Gupta, 2023)

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and continuous governmental efforts to universalize education, disparities in educational access and attainment continue to persist across different social groups. Gender inequality in education remains a major concern in many developing countries, including India. The educational experiences of individuals are deeply influenced by intersecting factors such as caste, gender, class, religion, and geographical location. Women belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged communities often face multiple layers of exclusion that limit their access to schooling and literacy opportunities. Although significant progress has been made in increasing enrollment and literacy rates over the decades, the benefits of educational development have not been distributed equally among all sections of society. Among the marginalized communities in India, Scheduled Castes have historically experienced social discrimination, economic deprivation, and restricted access to educational resources. Recognized by the Government of India as socially disadvantaged groups requiring special protection and affirmative measures, Scheduled Castes have remained at the margins of mainstream educational development for decades. The legacy of caste-based exclusion has had a long-term impact on their educational participation, particularly among women in rural areas. Social customs, poverty, patriarchal

attitudes, lack of educational infrastructure, and limited awareness regarding the importance of girls' education continue to affect literacy levels among Scheduled Caste women.

An analysis of Census data from 1961 to 2011 reveals a persistent gender gap in literacy among Scheduled Castes in India. Although literacy rates for both males and females have shown improvement over time, female literacy continues to remain significantly lower than male literacy, especially in rural regions. The findings indicate that educational inequality is not merely a statistical issue but reflects deeper structural and socio-cultural barriers embedded within society. The persistence of this gender gap raises important concerns regarding the effectiveness of educational policies and welfare programmes aimed at achieving equity and inclusion. While several studies have examined caste-based educational inequality and women's literacy independently, limited research has combined longitudinal Census analysis with the lived experiences of women affected by educational deprivation. Most existing studies focus either on statistical trends or localized qualitative narratives. Therefore, the present study attempts to bridge this gap by integrating Census-based analysis of literacy trends with qualitative insights gathered from women belonging to Scheduled Caste communities, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to gender disparity in literacy.

Significance of the Study

The present study holds considerable academic, social, policy, and methodological significance in understanding the persistent gender disparities in literacy among Scheduled Castes in India. By examining literacy trends over a period of six decades, the study provides a deeper understanding of how educational inequalities have evolved across rural, urban, and combined populations. It contributes meaningfully to the fields of gender studies, sociology of education, caste studies, and educational policy by highlighting the intersection of caste and gender in shaping educational opportunities. The longitudinal nature of the study makes it valuable for scholars seeking to understand historical patterns of exclusion and social change in Indian education.

From a social perspective, the study draws attention to the often invisible educational deprivation experienced by women belonging to marginalized communities. While national literacy rates may show overall improvement, such aggregate figures frequently conceal the struggles faced by socially disadvantaged women, especially in rural areas. The study attempts to bring these realities to the forefront by not only analyzing Census data but also incorporating the voices and lived experiences of women who have remained outside formal

education systems. In doing so, it humanizes statistical trends and provides a more grounded understanding of educational inequality. The study is also significant from a policy perspective. Its findings may help policymakers, educational planners, and social welfare agencies better understand the gaps that continue to exist despite various literacy and inclusion programmes implemented over the years. By identifying the socio-cultural and structural barriers responsible for low female literacy, the study can support the development of more targeted and inclusive educational policies. It may also assist in assessing the effectiveness of existing government initiatives aimed at promoting girls' education and social justice.

Importance of Women's Education

Women's education is widely recognized as one of the most important foundations for social progress, human development, and national growth. Educating women not only transforms individual lives but also contributes significantly to the overall well-being of families and communities. In societies marked by social and economic inequalities, education becomes a powerful means through which women can overcome barriers of discrimination, dependence, and exclusion. One of the most important aspects of women's education is empowerment. Education enhances women's awareness, confidence, and decision-making abilities. An educated woman is more likely to participate actively in family and community matters and exercise greater control over choices related to health, employment, marriage, and the education of her children. It enables women to challenge traditional stereotypes and assert their rights within society.

Women's education also plays a crucial role in economic participation and financial independence. Educated women contribute to household income through employment, entrepreneurship, and skilled occupations. Their participation in the workforce not only improves the economic condition of families but also contributes to national productivity and development. In many cases, women's education helps break the cycle of poverty by creating better opportunities for future generations.

The importance of women's education is equally visible in the areas of health and family welfare. Studies have consistently shown that female literacy is associated with lower infant mortality rates, improved maternal health, better nutritional practices, and increased awareness regarding healthcare and hygiene. Educated mothers are generally more informed about vaccination, sanitation, and child care, leading to healthier families and communities.

From the perspective of social justice, women's education is essential for reducing gender inequality and caste-based discrimination. It helps women challenge patriarchal attitudes, social exclusion, and oppressive social practices that limit their participation in society. Education provides marginalized women with a voice and greater social visibility.

4. Review of Literature

Several studies have examined the relationship between gender, caste, and educational inequality in India, highlighting the persistent barriers faced by marginalized communities, particularly women. Geeta Gandhi Kingdon (2002) investigated the gender gap in educational attainment in India and emphasized the role of parental discrimination in shaping unequal educational opportunities for boys and girls. Using household survey data from urban Uttar Pradesh, the study found that a significant portion of the educational gap resulted from intra-household bias rather than differences in ability or background characteristics. The study suggested the need for policy interventions aimed at changing social attitudes and reducing the economic burden associated with girls' education. Similarly, S. Goel and Zakir Husain (2018) examined gender and caste disparities in school retention and dropout rates in India. Their cohort-wise analysis revealed that although gender gaps in education have gradually declined over time, disparities continue to exist, particularly in rural areas and among socially disadvantaged communities. The study highlighted the importance of inclusive educational policies and targeted retention programmes for girls. Focusing on the rural–urban divide, S. Bandyopadhyay et al. (2021) explored educational inequalities between rural and urban India. The study found that merely improving infrastructure or introducing digital initiatives is insufficient unless socio-economic realities and local contexts are addressed. The authors emphasized the need for socially responsive educational interventions. Further, R. H. Raghavendra (2020) analyzed literacy and health indicators among Scheduled Castes using Census and NFHS data. The findings revealed that Scheduled Castes continue to experience substantial educational and social disadvantages compared to other groups. The reviewed literature clearly indicates that gender and caste remain major determinants of educational inequality in India. However, limited studies have combined long-term Census analysis with qualitative experiences of Scheduled Caste women, which the present study seeks to address.

5. Research Questions

1. What trends are observed in literacy among Scheduled Castes from 1961–2011?
2. How has the gender gap changed over time?

3. What factors contribute to low literacy among Scheduled Caste women?
4. What interventions can reduce educational inequality?

6. Research Objectives

1. To analyze decadal trends in literacy among Scheduled Caste males and females in rural, urban, and combined populations from 1961–2011.
2. To examine the magnitude and pattern of gender disparity in literacy among Scheduled Castes across six decades.
3. To explore socio-cultural, economic, and structural barriers affecting female literacy among Scheduled Caste women.
4. To propose policy recommendations for reducing gender-based educational disparities.

7. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a Mixed Method Research Approach by integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of gender disparity in literacy among Scheduled Castes in India. A Sequential Explanatory Mixed Method Design was employed, where the first phase focused on quantitative analysis of Census data from 1961–2011 obtained from the Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. The second phase involved qualitative exploration through in-depth interviews with Scheduled Caste women from selected rural communities in the Nuh and Palwal districts of Haryana. Complete Census data were utilized for quantitative analysis, while purposive sampling was adopted for selecting participants for qualitative inquiry to understand the socio-cultural factors responsible for low female literacy.

Table: Demographic Profile of the Interview Participants.

S. No.	Age Group (Years)	Number of Female Participants	Percentage (%)
1	18–30	7	43.75%
2	31–45	5	31.25%
3	46 and above	4	25.00%
Total	—	16	100%

Source: Field Study 2025

The demographic distribution of the respondents indicates that the majority of the participants belonged to the 18–30 years age group, comprising 43.75% of the total sample. Participants in the age group of 31–45 years constituted 31.25%, while women aged 46 years and above represented 25% of the sample. The inclusion of women from different age categories helped

in understanding intergenerational experiences and perspectives regarding educational access, literacy, and gender-based barriers among Scheduled Caste women in rural communities.

8. Objective-wise Analysis and Interpretation

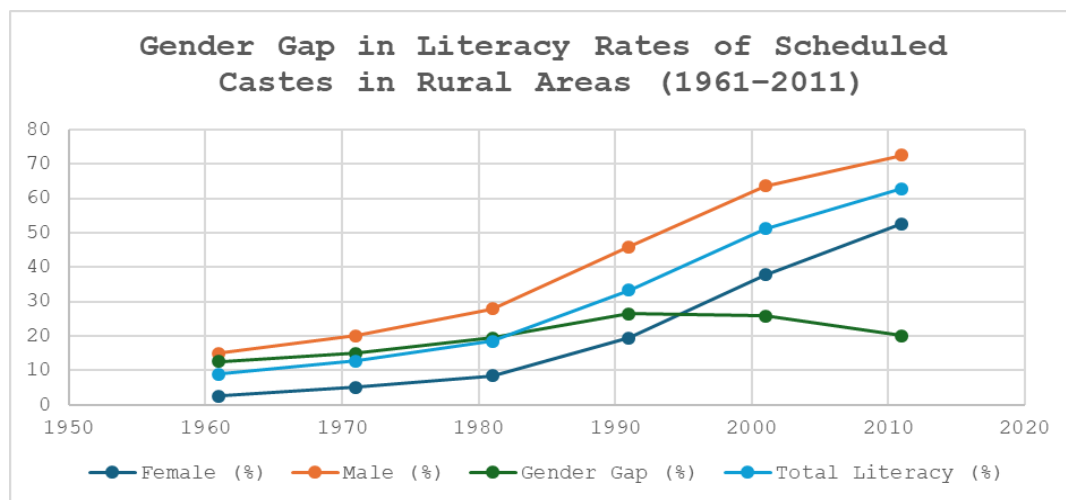
Objective 1: To analyze decadal trends in literacy among Scheduled Caste males and females in rural, urban, and combined populations from 1961–2011.

The analysis of Census data reveals that literacy among Scheduled Castes in India has improved significantly over the six decades from 1961 to 2011. However, the pace of educational progress has not been uniform across gender and location. Both rural and urban regions witnessed substantial increases in literacy rates, yet female literacy consistently remained lower than male literacy throughout the study period.

Table 2: Gender Gap in Literacy Rates of Scheduled Castes in Rural Areas. (1961–2011)

Year	Female (%)	Male (%)	Gender Gap (%)	Total Literacy (%)
1961	2.52	15.06	12.54	8.89
1971	5.06	20.04	14.98	12.77
1981	8.45	27.91	19.46	18.48
1991	19.45	45.95	26.50	33.25
2001	37.84	63.66	25.82	51.16
2011	52.56	72.58	20.02	62.85

Source: Census of India (1961–2011)



Interpretation

The data demonstrate that literacy among Scheduled Castes in rural India improved substantially across all decades. Rural female literacy increased from only 2.52% in 1961 to 52.56% in 2011, reflecting gradual expansion of educational opportunities among marginalized communities. Despite this progress, the gender gap remained consistently high.

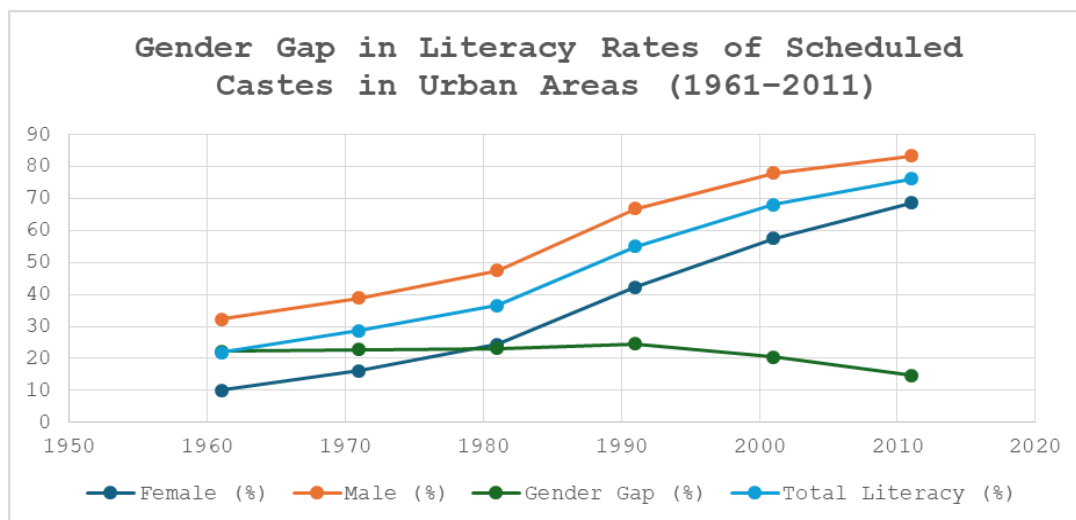
The disparity widened steadily from 12.54 percentage points in 1961 to 26.50 percentage points in 1991. Although the gap declined after 2001, rural women continued to remain educationally disadvantaged compared to men. The slower progress during earlier decades may be linked with poverty, social conservatism, weak educational infrastructure, and limited awareness regarding girls' education. The decline in gender disparity after 2001 reflects the possible impact of literacy campaigns, school expansion programmes, and growing social awareness concerning female education.

9.2 Urban Literacy Trends among Scheduled Castes

Table 3: Gender Gap in Literacy Rates of Scheduled Castes in Urban Areas. (1961–2011)

Year	Female (%)	Male (%)	Gender Gap (%)	Total Literacy (%)
1961	10.04	32.21	22.17	21.81
1971	16.09	38.93	22.84	28.65
1981	24.34	47.54	23.20	36.60
1991	42.29	66.90	24.61	55.11
2001	57.49	77.93	20.44	68.12
2011	68.64	83.32	14.68	76.17

Source: Census of India (1961–2011)



Interpretation

Urban literacy levels remained considerably higher than rural literacy throughout the study period. Female literacy among urban Scheduled Castes increased from 10.04% in 1961 to 68.64% in 2011.

The findings indicate that urban women benefited from relatively better educational facilities, transportation, awareness, and institutional access. However, despite higher literacy levels,

gender disparities remained substantial. The urban gender gap exceeded 22 percentage points during the earlier decades and remained significant until the late 1990s.

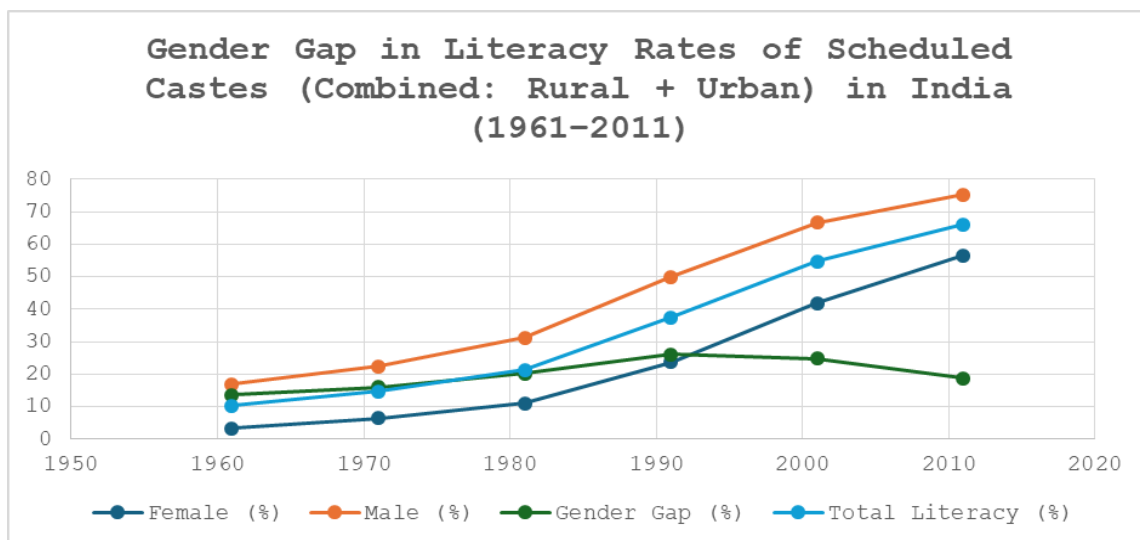
The decline in the literacy gap after 2001 indicates improving educational participation among urban women, possibly influenced by urbanization, economic mobility, and educational reforms promoting girls' schooling.

9.3 Combined Literacy Trends among Scheduled Castes in India

Table 4: Gender Gap in Literacy Rates of Scheduled Castes (Combined: Rural + Urban) in India. (1961–2011)

Year	Female (%)	Male (%)	Gender Gap (%)	Total Literacy (%)
1961	3.29	16.96	13.67	10.27
1971	6.44	22.36	15.92	14.67
1981	10.93	31.12	20.19	21.38
1991	23.76	49.91	26.15	37.41
2001	41.90	66.64	24.74	54.69
2011	56.46	75.17	18.71	66.07

Source: Census of India (1961–2011)



Interpretation

The combined literacy trends indicate that educational progress among Scheduled Castes improved steadily over six decades. Female literacy increased from 3.29% in 1961 to 56.46% in 2011, while male literacy increased from 16.96% to 75.17% during the same period. Although literacy expansion among women was significant, the gender gap remained persistent throughout all Census periods. The disparity widened continuously from 1961 and reached its peak in 1991 with a gap of 26.15 percentage points. After 2001, the gap gradually declined, reflecting improvements in female educational participation. The findings suggest

that educational reforms and welfare programmes positively influenced literacy growth; however, structural inequalities associated with caste, poverty, and gender continued to affect educational outcomes among Scheduled Castes. The persistence of educational disparity indicates that social transformation occurred unevenly across different sections of society.

Objective 3: *To explore socio-cultural, economic, and structural barriers affecting female literacy among Scheduled Caste women.*

To understand the reasons behind low literacy among Scheduled Caste women, qualitative interviews were conducted with 16 women from rural communities. Thematic analysis of interview responses revealed several interconnected barriers affecting women's educational participation.

Table 3: Major Themes Emerging from Interviews.

S. No.	Themes	Nature of Responses
1	Poverty and Economic Hardship	Families prioritized earning over education
2	Early Marriage	Girls discontinued schooling after adolescence
3	Household Responsibilities	Domestic work limited school attendance
4	Gender Bias	Preference given to boys education
5	Lack of School Accessibility	Distance and transport problems
6	Social and Caste Discrimination	Feelings of exclusion and low social support

Theme 1: Poverty and Economic Hardship

Most participants explained that economic survival was prioritized over girls' education. Several women shared that their families depended on daily wage labor, making schooling financially difficult. *"We needed income more than education. Sending girls to school was considered an extra burden."* The findings indicate that poverty remains one of the strongest barriers affecting female literacy among Scheduled Castes.

Theme 2: Early Marriage,

Many participants reported discontinuing education due to early marriage. Girls were often expected to assume domestic responsibilities soon after adolescence. *"After marriage, education was no longer considered necessary."* This reflects the continuing influence of patriarchal social norms on women's educational opportunities.

Theme 3: Household Responsibilities

Women reported spending significant time in household labor, sibling care, and agricultural activities, reducing opportunities for schooling.

Theme 4: Gender Bias

Interview responses showed that boys' education was often prioritized because families believed sons would become future earners.

Theme 5: School Accessibility and Discrimination

Participants from older age groups particularly highlighted the absence of nearby schools and experiences of social discrimination, which discouraged regular attendance.

Objective 4: To propose policy recommendations for reducing gender-based educational disparities.

The findings suggest that literacy inequality among Scheduled Castes cannot be addressed solely through enrollment-focused policies. Educational exclusion is closely connected with poverty, patriarchy, caste discrimination, and rural disadvantage.

Table 4: Suggested Policy Interventions.

Level	Suggested Measures
Community Level	Awareness campaigns on girls' education
School Level	Safe transportation and female teachers
Government Level	Scholarships and conditional cash transfers
Policy Level	Gender-responsive and caste-sensitive planning

Existing initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao have contributed positively toward improving literacy levels. However, the study indicates that policies must move beyond infrastructure development and focus more deeply on social attitudes, economic insecurity, and gender-sensitive educational planning.

The findings further suggest the need for localized interventions, community participation, and stronger implementation of educational support mechanisms for marginalized girls in rural areas.

9. Major Findings of the Study

Finding 1: Literacy among Scheduled Castes has improved significantly over the decades, but gender disparity continues to persist. The analysis of Census data from 1961 to 2011 indicates a substantial increase in literacy rates among Scheduled Castes in both rural and urban areas. Female literacy, which was extremely low in the early decades, showed noticeable improvement over time. However, despite this progress, female literacy remained consistently lower than male literacy throughout the study period. The findings suggest that

educational development has not been equally experienced across genders, particularly among socially marginalized communities.

Finding 2: The gender gap in literacy was more severe during the earlier decades and reached its peak around 1991. The study found that the literacy gap between Scheduled Caste males and females widened steadily from 1961 and reached its highest point during the 1991 Census period. Although the gap began to decline after 2001, complete parity has still not been achieved. This trend reflects the long-term impact of social exclusion, patriarchal attitudes, and unequal educational opportunities experienced by women.

Finding 3: Rural women faced greater educational barriers compared to urban women. The findings reveal that Scheduled Caste women in rural areas experienced more severe disadvantages due to poverty, limited school accessibility, lack of educational infrastructure, and traditional social norms. Urban women showed comparatively better literacy outcomes because of improved educational facilities, awareness, and exposure to social development initiatives.

Finding 4: Socio-cultural and economic factors continue to influence women's educational participation. The qualitative findings highlighted that poverty, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, gender discrimination, and caste-based exclusion remain major barriers to female literacy. Many women reported that boys' education was prioritized within families, while girls were expected to contribute to household work or marry at an early age. These findings demonstrate that educational inequality is deeply connected with broader social and cultural structures.

10. Causes of Low Female Literacy

The study identified multiple interconnected factors responsible for low literacy among Scheduled Caste women. One of the major causes was poverty and economic hardship. Families with limited financial resources often viewed girls' education as less important than immediate economic survival. In many cases, girls were required to assist in household labor, agricultural activities, or sibling care, which reduced their chances of attending school regularly. Patriarchal attitudes and gender stereotypes also emerged as significant barriers. The belief that boys would become future earners while girls would eventually marry discouraged investment in girls' education. Early marriage further interrupted educational continuity among many women. Institutional factors such as lack of nearby schools, poor transportation facilities, absence of female teachers, and inadequate school infrastructure also contributed to low participation. In addition, several participants reported experiences of

caste-based discrimination and social exclusion, which negatively affected their educational motivation and confidence.

11. Policy Implications / Remedial Measures

The findings of the study highlight the need for more inclusive, gender-sensitive, and community-oriented educational policies. Merely increasing school enrollment is insufficient unless the deeper socio-cultural barriers affecting girls' education are addressed. At the community level, awareness programmes should be organized to promote the importance of girls' education and challenge patriarchal attitudes. Local participation, mothers' literacy groups, and community-based educational campaigns may help create supportive learning environments for girls. At the institutional level, improving school infrastructure, ensuring safe transportation, appointing female teachers, and providing separate sanitation facilities can encourage greater participation of girls in education. Financial support in the form of scholarships, free educational materials, and conditional cash transfer schemes should be strengthened for marginalized families. At the policy level, educational planning should adopt an intersectional approach that recognizes the combined effects of caste, gender, poverty, and rural disadvantage. Existing programmes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and National Education Policy 2020 should further emphasize educational inclusion among socially disadvantaged girls.

13. CONCLUSION

The present study examines that literacy among Scheduled Castes in India has improved considerably over the last six decades. However, the persistence of gender disparity indicates that educational progress has remained uneven and socially stratified. While government initiatives and educational reforms have contributed to rising literacy rates, Scheduled Caste women, particularly in rural areas, continue to face multiple barriers rooted in poverty, patriarchy, caste discrimination, and social exclusion. The integration of Census analysis with women's lived experiences reveals that educational inequality cannot be understood only through statistical indicators. Behind every percentage lies a complex reality shaped by family expectations, economic hardship, limited opportunities, and unequal social structures. The study therefore emphasizes that achieving educational equality requires more than policy expansion; it demands socially responsive, community-based, and gender-just interventions. Education has the potential to transform not only individual lives but also the social position of historically marginalized communities. Ensuring equitable access to education for

Scheduled Caste women is therefore essential for achieving social justice, democratic inclusion, and sustainable national development.

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