Where are we at?
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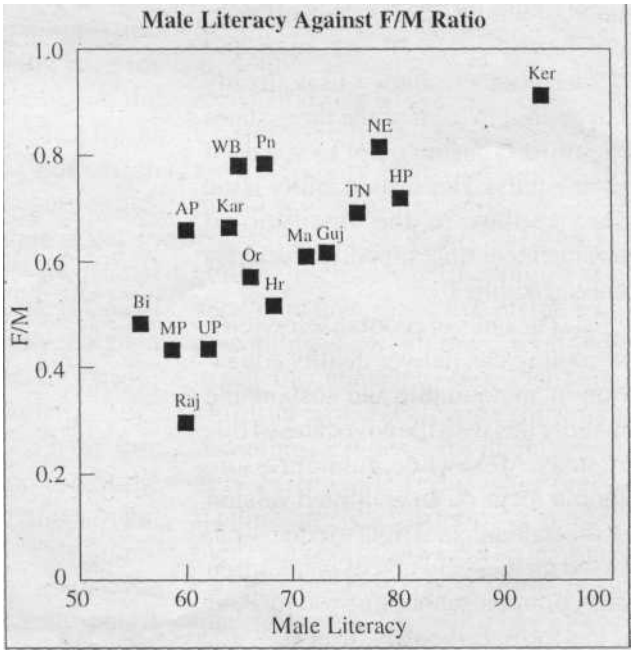
IT is usually accepted that 4-5 years of schooling is needed for durable literacy. On the assumption that 'basic education' has a simple objective, i.e. a literate population (as opposed to an educated one), this paper presents some of the patterns observed in our achievements in moving towards this objective. The data presented here is drawn from an NCAER survey conducted in 1993-94 for rural India.

Taking the country as a whole, in rural India 65.6% of males and 40% of females over the age of 7 are found to be literate, or a little over half (53.5%) of the population. Not surprisingly the highest levels of literacy are found in Kerala, at 93% of males and 86.5 % of females, considerably above any other state. Himachal Pradesh and the North East follow, with 79.4% (M) and 57% (F) in Himachal Pradesh, and 77% (M) and 60.9% (F) in the North East. At the other extreme are Bihar, with 56.6% for males and 28.8% for females; and Rajasthan with 60.4% for males and 19% for females. The states with low levels of male literacy are also the ones with the highest gender gap. This relationship is shown in the diagram using data at state level and the ratio of female to male literacy as a measure of the gender gap in literacy.



These regional disparities are well known. The data shows that literacy levels increase steadily as income increases. At a household income level of under Rs 20,000,57% of males and 32.5% of females are literate; at levels over Rs 86,000 the corresponding figures are 86.4 and 62.2. The increase in literacy is more pronounced for females, since the levels for males are always higher than for females. Thus, in Rajasthan, the level for females from households with average per capita income per annum of under Rs 1500 is 13% and this goes up to 36% for households with income over Rs 6000. In contrast, the difference between land owners and landless is not very sharp; it is 68% (M) and 41.3% (F) for land owners and 60.4% and 37.6% for landless. However, landless wage earners are less fortunate.

The lowest level of literacy among different occupation groups is among daily wage earners at 48.7%

* This paper presents data from the NCAER Human Development Profile of India: inter-state and inter-group differentials (November 1996). 1 would like to thank Dr. Abusaleh Shariff for his suggestions. Any opinions expressed here are entirely personal.

(M) and 27.2 (F) and the highest among the salaried/professional at 85% (M) and 58.2 (F). The compounding of vulnerabilities due to occupation, gender and region is reflected in the literacy rates of female wage earners in the states of Bihar, U.P. and Rajasthan. Thus, the levels for male wage earners in Bihar is 29.3%, in U.P. 39.4% and in Rajasthan 44.9%. In the case of females, the rates are 10.3 in Bihar, 9.7 in U.P. and only 6% in Rajasthan.

Caste groups show the lowest levels for STs (51.3 M and 26 F) with the levels being much higher for non SC/ST Hindus (72.3 M and 45 F). Likewise, taking religious groups, for all Hindus the level is 65.9 (M) and 39.2 (F), for Muslims 59.5 (M) and 38 (F) and for Christians 85 (M) and 76.5 (F).

More immediate environments make an impact. In households where both parents are educated, the literacy levels are 89.5 (M) and 74.7 (F) while for households where both are illiterate the levels are 15.4 (M) and 8.7 (F). As between parents, a literate mother has greater impact on child literacy. In villages with a low level of development, the levels are 56.1 (M) and 26.5 (F) and in those with a high level the figures are 74.4 and 52.7.

Clearly, the average achievement levels hide wide variations. Any concern with strengthening the educational system calls for some understanding of diverse performances. It is relatively easy to postulate that if education levels can be raised, appropriate employment opportunities made available, and higher levels of income generated, then we have the potential here for a dynamic virtuous circle of ever increasing levels of education, productivity and income. But for those who are not part of this growth dynamic, the incentives for education may be low.

From the evidence of village surveys, it does not appear that there is a lack of motivation, in that people are well aware of the potential benefits from education. These are perceived as being of different kinds. The most widespread is the demand for functional literacy, especially among women: the ability to read numbers, communicate with officials, write letters, use ration cards, all of the diverse ways in which literacy and numeracy are almost essential in a monetized and increasingly urbanized economy. Literacy or education is also seen as a safety net, again especially for women: it may not be seen as an essential attribute to play the role of mother, wife and partner in work, but in case of misfortune, some level of literacy will afford better chances of earning an independent income.

The perception of education as a means of getting a better job and hence provide upward mobility in the society is perhaps the most problematic, because even while it offers an effective tool to encourage greater participation in school, it can simultaneously lead to the unforeseen impact of unfulfilled expectations. Finally, education may be seen as a means of empowerment: control over one's life in more than just an economic sense.

Restricting ourselves to functional literacy, a demand for which is enough to ensure that children are enrolled in school, it is difficult to explain why we are still well short of universal enrolment. If the problem is not demand, is it that there are no schools? *Or* do they exist only on paper? Or is schooling too expensive?

As with literacy, there is considerable variation in enrolment rates. Among the poorer performing states, we find the greatest gender disparity in Rajasthan, with the ever enrolment rate being 78% of males and 41.9% of females. Corresponding figures for U.P. are 73.2% (M) and 53.4% (F) and for Bihar 64.7% (M) and 51.2% (F). Enrolment of course, is only half the picture: it is well known that irregular attendance and discontinuation or dropout are persistent problems. Discontinuation rates' are highest among landless wage earners-7.5 for males and 13.7 for females, as against 4.2 for males and 6.7 for females among land owners. Among the states, the highest rates are found in Andhra Pradesh, for landless wage earners at 14% for males and 20.9% for females. Regional differences may be due to opportunities for employment of children, but one striking fact about discontinuation needs to be noted. These rates are found to be low for children in the age group 6-11, and significantly higher in the 12-14 age group, a pattern observed in all states. For rural India as a whole, the differences are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Discontinuation Rates (6-14 years)

	Rural India	
	M	*F*
6-9 years	0.71	1.01
6-11 years	1.68	2.70
12-14 years	10.84	17.07

The implication is that if children can be enrolled in school at a young age, there is a good possibility of imparting 4-5 years of teaching before the social and economic pressures that result in dropout mount high.

This data can be supplemented with data from another survey carried out by the NCAER (MIMAP-India 1995)

1. The more commonly used expression, 'drop out rate' is not used here, and the term 'discontinuation rate' is used instead, because drop out rates are generally calculated per annum; the figures given here however are an average of all those who discontinued schooling at any time in the ages between 6 and 14 years.

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