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Bridging the Gap: An Analytical Study of the Gender Gap in Indian Education (1951–2021)

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Abstract-- This paper investigates the historical path of gender disparity in Indian education from 1951 to 2021. By analysing secondary data on literacy rates, Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER), and dropout rates, the study evaluates the effectiveness of India's educational interventions. The analysis reveals a paradigm shift from severe gender asymmetry in the post-independence era to near-parity in enrolment by 2021. That is by correlating literacy outcomes, enrolment ratios, and dropout rates, the study evaluates how India has transitioned from a system of male privilege in education to one of statistical parity in access. However, a persistent 14.4% gap in literacy rates highlights the continued need for targeted policy focus on adult female literacy and retention quality.

Keywords-- Dropout Rates, Educational access, Enrolment Ratio, Gender gap, Literacy rate

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized not merely as a fundamental human right but as a catalyst for socio-economic transformation. In the context of India, the education of women has been a critical challenge. At the time of independence in 1947, the educational landscape was characterized by mass illiteracy, particularly among women, driven by patriarchal norms, economic constraints, and a lack of infrastructure.

Access to education is the foundational metric of a nation's development. In the Indian context, "access" has historically been defined by severe gender asymmetry. For decades, the ability of a female child to enter and remain in the school system was constrained by socio-economic barriers, resulting in a distinct "gender gap."

The "Gender Gap" in education—defined as the disparity between male and female indicators in literacy, enrolment, and retention—has been a focal point of India's development policy. From the Kothari Commission (1964) to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, bridging this gap has been a stated priority.

This paper examines whether the quantitative explosion in school enrolment has translated into qualitative equality in literacy and retention. By utilizing Census data, NSO reports, and UDISE statistics, this study maps the narrowing of the gender divide over seven decades.

II. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Women education in every economy highlights the transformative impact of education on individuals, families, and entire societies. Educated women gain the knowledge, skills, and confidence to make informed decisions about their lives, leading to greater financial independence and improved health outcomes for themselves and their families. Hence Understanding the gender gap in education is crucial for several reasons. Female education is positively correlated with increased workforce participation and GDP growth. Higher female literacy rates are statistically linked to lower infant mortality rates (IMR), lower total fertility rates (TFR), and better family nutrition. Besides, while enrolment parity is near, understanding the lagging literacy rates helps in formulating adult education strategies for the next decade.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To examine disparities in access to education across gender by analyzing trends in literacy, enrolment, and dropout rates.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This is a quantitative, descriptive study based on longitudinal trend analysis. The study relies on secondary data (1951-2021) from the Census of India, Unified District Information Systems for Education (UDISE), and Ministry of Education reports. "Access" to education is operationalized through three indicators: Gross Enrolment Ratio (measures *initial entry*), Dropout Rates (measures *continued access*) and Literacy Rates (Measures the *cumulative historical access*). The study utilizes tabular analysis. Trends are interpreted by comparing decadal growth rates. Gap analysis is used to quantify disparities.

V. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The study made use of indicators like Enrolment Ratio, Dropout rates and literacy Rates. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) measures the *initial entry* into the system, Dropout Rates measures *continued access* or retention and Literacy

Rates measures the *cumulative historical access* or outcome.

Table 1
Trends in Literacy Rates (1951–2021)

Year	Female	Male	Total
1951	8.86	27.16	18.33
1961	15.35	40.40	28.30
1971	21.97	45.96	34.45
1981	29.76	56.38	43.57
1991	39.21	64.13	52.21
2001	53.67	75.26	64.83
2011	65.46	82.14	74.04
2021*	70.30	84.70	77.70

Source: Census of India

**NSO Data*

Table 1 provides a snapshot of India's literacy journey. In 1951, the situation was serious. The female literacy rate was a negligible 8.86%, compared to 27.16% for males. The gender gap stood at 18.3%.

An interesting phenomenon occurred during 1951-1991 is that while female literacy improved (reaching 39.21% in 1991), male literacy improved faster (reaching 64.13%). Consequently, the gender gap actually *widened* to approximately 24.92% in 1991. This suggests that the initial fruits of educational expansion were largely harvested by males.

But the trend reversed post-1991. Between 2001 and 2011, female literacy jumped by nearly 12 percentage points. According to the latest census data, the male literacy rate is 84.70% and female is 70.30%.

While the total literacy rate has reached a respectable 77.70%, a gender gap of 14.4% persists. This indicates that while we are educating the young girl child effectively, there remains a massive backlog of illiterate adult women from previous generations.

Table 2
Gross enrolment ratio in elementary education

Year	Primary		Upper primary	
	Male	female	Male	female
1950	61	25	21	5
1960	83	41	33	11
1970	96	61	47	21
1980	96	64	54	29
1990	95	72	80	52
2001	105	87	67	50
2021	105	102	95	95

Source: Unified District Information Systems for Education, Ministry of Education

Table 2 illustrates the access to schooling. GER measures the number of students enrolled at a level of education, regardless of age, as a percentage of the population of official school age for that level.

In 1950, the disparity was severe. GER for males was 61 and females was 25. Girls were less than half as likely to be enrolled as boys. More precisely, for every 3 boys entering primary school, only 1 girl had access. By 1990, the female GER rose to 72, but the male GER was 95. In 2021 the data shows a GER of 105 for males and 102 for females. In statistical terms, this indicates Gender Parity in access to primary education. A GER over 100 for females indicates that even over-age girls who were previously denied access are now entering the system.

Upper Primary Education from table 2 showed the most dramatic improvement. In 1950, the female GER was only 5 (compared to Male 21). Effectively, upper primary education was a "male-only" domain. By 2021, the GER for both males and females converged at 95. This is a landmark achievement, suggesting that girls are not just entering school but transitioning to the upper primary stage at the same rate as boys.

Table 3
Dropout rates in elementary education

Year	Primary		Upper primary	
	Male	female	Male	female
1960-61	61.7	70.9	75	85
1970-71	64.5	70.9	74.6	83.4
1980-81	56.2	62.5	68	79.4
1990-91	40.1	46	59.1	65.1
2000-01	39.7	41.9	50.3	57.7
2010-11	29	25.4	40.6	41.2
2020-21	1.4	1.6	2.7	3.3

Source: Open Govt data (OGD) platform India (data.gov.in)

UDISE +2021-22 Report, Ministry of Education, GoI

Table 3 highlights the system's efficiency in retaining students. High enrolment is futile if students drop out before completion. In 1960-61, the dropout rate for girls in primary school was 70.9%, and in upper primary, it was 85%. This implies that out of 100 girls who entered school, only 15 reached the upper primary level. And the female dropout rate at the primary level shows that the system failed to retain 7 out of 10 girls who entered.

The gender gap in dropouts was significant; families were far more likely to pull girls out of school for domestic work or due to lack of sanitation facilities.

By 2010-11, dropout rates fell to 25.4% (Primary Female) and 41.2% (Upper Primary Female). The introduction of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) played a significant role here, incentivizing retention.

Between 1990 and 2010, the female dropout rate in primary education nearly halved, falling from 46% to 25.4%. This suggests that access was deepening; girls were not just enrolling, they were staying.

The data for the year 2020-21 reports a massive drop to 1.6% (Primary Female) and 3.3% (Upper Primary Female). In 2020-21, the dropout rate for males (Primary 1.4%, Upper Primary 2.7%) is statistically comparable to females. In some states, boys are now dropping out at higher rates than girls to join the informal labor force.

The above analysis confirms that India has achieved its objective of eliminating gender disparities in *educational access*. The equalization of GER (Table 2) proves that the *availability* of schools is no longer the primary barrier. The dropout data (Table 3) suggests that once girls are in school, they are largely staying there. This can be attributed to improved infrastructure (separate toilets for girls), free textbooks, and uniforms. The persisting 14.4% gap in literacy (Table 1) despite high enrolment suggests two things. One is, the population of women aged 40+ who missed the education wave in the 70s and 80s remains illiterate. The other is, Enrolment does not always equal learning. A child may be enrolled (boosting GER) but not learning effectively (affecting literacy).

VI. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that while the battle for access has been won, the war for complete educational equality continues, now shifting focus from enrolling young girls to educating adult women who were left behind by history. From 1951 to 2021, India successfully dismantled the barriers to entry for the girl child. The convergence of GER values at 105 (Male) and 102 (Female) is a testament to this success. The reduction of female dropout rates from 85% (1960) to 3.3% (2021) in upper primary education is perhaps the most significant statistical victory recorded in the analysed tables.

However, the journey is not complete. The literacy gap, while narrowing, still indicates that women are disproportionately represented among the unlettered. Future policy must pivot from "Enrolment Drives" to "Learning Outcomes" and "Adult Remedial Education" to ensure that the statistical parity in schools translates into genuine empowerment in society.

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