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**Author/s: TANUSHREE KUNDU
PRASHANT KUMAR ARYA**

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A Spatial Perspective on Gendered Literacy in Urban India

TANUSHREE KUNDU*

Email: tanushreekundu87@gmail.com

&

PRASHANT KUMAR ARYA

Email: prashantarya5@gmail.com

Research Scholars

Centre for the Study of Regional Development
Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

* Correspondence author.

Abstract: Literacy is not only an index of socio-economic development of a given region, but also an indicator of social transformation, a pointer of changing mindsets of the people in the society. Education is also a ‘giant leap forward’ in empowering the women – the perennially deprived section of our society.

This paper is an attempt to consider the spatial pattern of ‘gendered literacy’ in urban India. It is regarding the prevailing gender disparity or gender-gap in literacy in the urban context, over the five decades. The Class-I cities, the prime urban areas, which are not only regarded as ‘engines of growth’ but ‘shrines of social change’, contrary to all expectations, are glaring examples of high gender disparity in literacy. Most regretfully, the situation refuses to change over the decades and inequality in literacy between male and female genders continue to exist even in major urban centres of India. The inequity is not uniformly spread but marred by the aspect of spatial variation or regional disparity and the extent of dissimilarity depends on multifaceted factors such as

their relative locational aspect, functional characteristics, and nature and process of evolution.

The matter under concern is whether the major urban centres i.e. Class- I cities boast of a distinctive urban pattern which is detached from regional constrictions or rather pursue predictable regional pattern in explaining gendered literacy. The spatial impact thus revealed shall help in understanding the role of ‘space’ as an important factor of gendered aspects including literacy in India.

Keywords: Gendered Literacy, Urban literacy, Female literacy, Gender disparity in literacy.

1. Introduction:

Literacy is one of the major factors which increase the capability of the people to make appropriate utilization of the socio-economic-political developments. As Amartya Sen’s “Capability Approach”¹ mentions and specially highlights that in order to bring development, it is equally important to increase the capability of people so that they are competent of reaping the benefits of the economic development that is being brought about.

As per the provisional population totals of 2011 census, the general literacy rate stands at 74.04%, while male literacy has been way ahead with 82.14%, the female literacy has yet again been lagging behind with 65.46%, leaving a humiliating difference of 16.68 points.² The figures in table 1 reveal that the illiterate section, especially among the female segment of the society, is still quite large, if not in comparison to the immediate post-independence scenario, but obviously in contrast to other countries and in comparison to the numerous mass education programs undertaken to improve it.

¹Sen, Amartya. 1989. "Development as capability expansion." *Journal of Development Planning*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 41–58

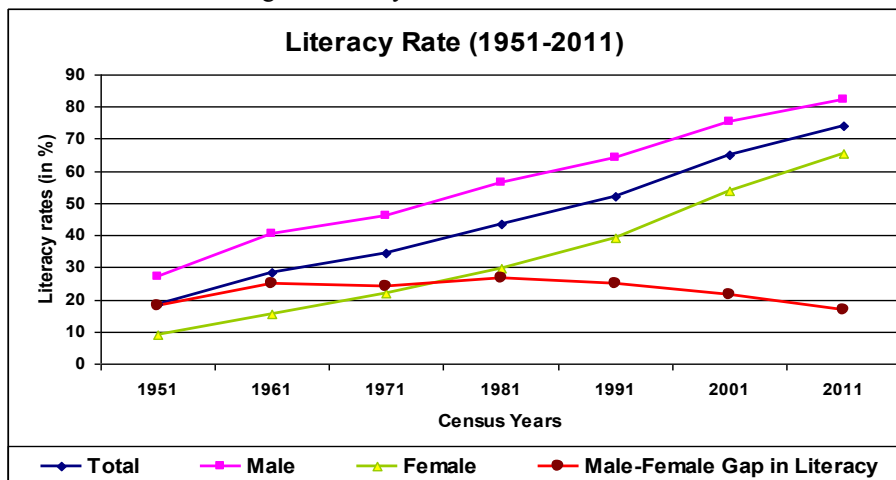
² Census of India. 2011. Provisional Population Totals: India. India at a Glance: Census 2011, Retrieved June 07, 2016, from <http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/indiaatglance.html>

Table 1: Literacy Rate in India: 1951 - 2011 (in %)³

Census Year	Total	Male	Female	Male-Female Gap in Literacy
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86	18.30
1961	28.3	40.4	15.35	25.05
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97	23.98
1981	43.57	56.38	29.76	26.62
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29	24.84
2001	64.83	75.26	53.67	21.59
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46	16.68

Source: Census of India. (2011). Provisional Population Totals: India. Chapter 6: State of Literacy, Statement – 20. p. 102.

Fig. 1: Literacy Rate in India: 1951-2011⁴



Source: Census of India. 2011. Provisional Population Totals: India. Chapter 6: State of Literacy, Figure-26. p. 102.

³ Census of India. (2011). Provisional Population Totals: India. Chapter:6 : State of Literacy, Statement – 20. pp. 102. Retrieved June 07, 2016, from

[http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-](http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/india/Final_PPT_2011_chapter6.pdf)

[results/data_files/india/Final_PPT_2011_chapter6.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/india/Final_PPT_2011_chapter6.pdf) and

<http://www.educationforallinindia.com/chapter6-state-of-literacy-2011-census.pdf>

⁴ Census of India. (2011). Provisional Population Totals: India. Chapter:6 : State of Literacy, Figure-26. pp. 102. Retrieved June 07, 2016, from

[http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-](http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/india/Final_PPT_2011_chapter6.pdf)

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<http://www.educationforallinindia.com/chapter6-state-of-literacy-2011-census.pdf>

There has been gradual increase in the literacy rates of both male and female, but there still exists a certain gap in the male-female literacy, which however is apparently declining constantly ever since the 1991 census and is positioned at 16.68 percentage points in 2011 which is a record minimum but still falls short of the target set for 2011-12 by the Planning Commission of 10% gap.

Table 2: Urban Literacy in India (in %)

Census Year	Total Literacy (%)	Urban Literacy (%) ⁵
1961	28.3	51.68
1981	43.57	61.44
2001	64.83	71.17

Source: Census of India. (1961). Series 1, Vol. 1, Part II-A, India: Union. Primary Census Abstract; Census of India, (1981), Series 1, India, Part – II –B, Primary Census Abstract, General Population and Census of India, (2001), Series 1, India, Part – II –B, Primary Census Abstract, General Population

Note: Urban literacy = Literacy rates of the Class – I cities of India.

Out of the 65% of literate population in 2001 census, a major chunk has been contributed by urban areas. With the increase in the number of Class-I cities from 105 in 1961 to 226 in 1981 and 441 in 2001, the literacy rate has also increased in the cities from 51.68% in 1961 to 61.44% in 1981 and 71.17% in 2001. The same 105 cities of 1961 which recorded 51.68% literacy, registered about 71.17% literacy in 2001. Thus, literacy in India is literally *urban literacy*.

The cities, in spite of having comparatively higher literacy rates than other areas, are the iconic and ironic symbols of stark *gendered literacy* or gender disparity in literacy. There exists striking difference in literacy performance among the major urban centres as well. With six decades of independence, the expansion of educational facilities has not

⁵ Urban Literacy has been computed by the author for the same 105 Class-I cities of 1961 through 1981 and 2001 from data collected from Census of India. (1961). Series 1, Vol. 1, Part II-A, India: Union. Primary Census Abstract; Census of India, (1981), Series 1, India, Part – II –B, Primary Census Abstract, General Population and Census of India, (2001), Series 1, India, Part – II –B, Primary Census Abstract, General Population

been accompanied by equalization of opportunities for all as echoed by Professor Amartya Sen⁶.

This paper is an attempt or rather an insight into the prevailing *gendered literacy* in urban India over five decades. The Class-I cities, the prime urban areas, which are not only regarded as ‘engines of growth’ but ‘shrines of social change’, contrary to all expectations, are glaring examples of high gender disparity in literacy. Most regrettably, the situation refuses to change over the decades and inequality in literacy between males and females still exists even in the major cities. The inequity is not uniformly spread but marred by the aspect of regional variation and the extent of variation depends on multifaceted factors such as their relative locational aspect, functional characteristics, and nature and process of evolution.

2. Literature Review:

The available literature has a point to make regarding the existing difference in literacy pattern of class-I cities. The major urban areas, i.e. the cities under the Class-I category, instead of reflecting a characteristic social transformation under the urban environment, still maintain their conventional norms. This stands especially true of the newly emergent urban areas than the pre-existing industrial towns.

Immense research has been done in the field of regional literacy pattern in India. Amongst them the pioneer works of Gosal (1964; 1979) needs special mention. He embarked on the literacy and urbanization linkages and established a correlation between literacy rates and gender gap in literacy. In his subsequent works he pointed out the North-South distinction in literacy pattern.

Krishan and Shyam (1973) dealt with the pattern of female literacy in particular and in his subsequent work Krishan and Shyam (1974) in the paper entitled “Literacy Pattern of Indian Cities” emphasized on the urban literacy scenario and presented complex socio-economic causal factors such as urban-ward migration, socio-economic development

⁶ Sen, Amartya. 1989. "Development as capability expansion". *Journal of Development Planning*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 41–58

levels, regional influence and locational impact for ramping illiteracy in urban areas.

Gender disparity in literacy has been dealt with by Tirtha (1966), Krishan and Shyam (1977), and Gosal (1979) in which they have studied the male-female literacy pattern and gender-gap in literacy rates in India. However David Sopher's (1980) extensive work in this field requires a special mention. He established a high correlation between urbanization and literacy rates. His immense study on district level spatial pattern of literacy witnessed an emergent distinctive regional pattern, with a sharp North-South differential in gender disparity in literacy. While South India depicted low gender gap in literacy combined with high female literacy, North India displayed an exact vice versa. Raju (1988) studied the urban dimension of female literacy with an insight into the sex and caste disparity in Class-I cities of India according to the 1981 Census. It concluded that "instead of exhibiting pan-Indian urban character independent of regional constraints, the cities tend to follow the pattern of the regions in which they are located."⁷

3. Objectives:

The present study shall be an attempt to study this *spatial impact on gendered literacy* which overrides the urban character of the Class-I cities of India. In this process it would re-investigate the results of the above studies in a more contemporary context of 1991 and 2001.

4. Database and Methodology:

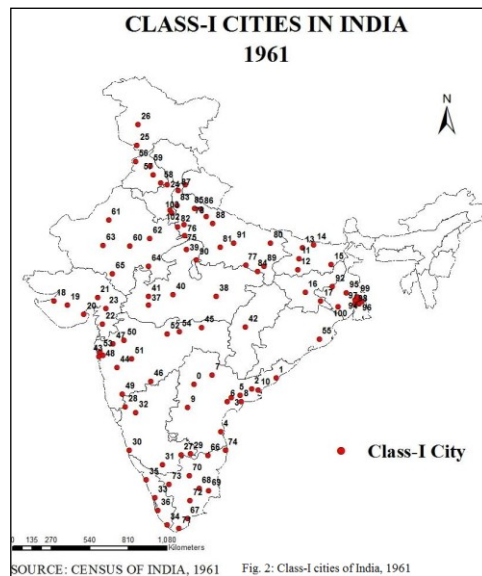
The study is restricted to the cities with Municipal Corporations having more than one lakh population and in order to make the study comparable over the five decades, the class-I cities of 1961 census has been taken as the base (Fig. 2). The database is collected from Census of India 1961 to 2001. The *Gendered Literacy* or Gender Disparity in literacy has been measured by the Modified version of Sopher's

⁷ Raju, S. 1988. "Female Literacy in India: The Urban Dimension." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 23, No. 44, pp. 57-64

Disparity Index (DIS)⁸ by Kundu and Rao (1986).⁹ The idea, design and pattern of the present study have been inspired from the unpublished doctoral thesis of Sahoo (1987)¹⁰. My endeavour has been only to carry forward the base work to the contemporary situation and make an extensive temporal comparison.

5. Analysis:

The literacy scenario of the post independence period has been captured in this paper, with respect to total literacy, male and female literacy and gender disparity in literacy. The literacy rates have been depicted through necessary cartographical tools in order to bring forth the regional pattern.



⁸ Sopher, David E. 1974. "A Measure of Disparity." *The Professional Geographer*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 389-392.

⁹ Kundu, A. and J.M. Rao. 1986. "Inequity in Educational Development: Issues in Measurement, Changing Structure and Its Socio- Economic Correlates with special reference to India." In Moonis Raza (ed.), *Educational Planning: A Long Term Perspective*, 435-466. New Delhi: National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA).

¹⁰ Sahoo, Gitarani. 1987. "Literacy in class I cities of India: A socio-geographic interpretation", Unpublished Theses, Centre for Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Table 3.
LIST OF CLASS-I CITIES IN 1961

SL. NO.	STATE/CITY	SL. NO.	STATE/CITY	SL. NO.	STATE/CITY	SL. NO.	STATE/CITY
	ANDHRA PR.	27	SRINAGAR	54	THANA	80	DEHRADUN
1	HYDERABAD		KARNATAKA	55	AMRAVATI	81	GORAKHPUR
2	VISAKHAPATNAM	28	BANGALORE		ORISSA	82	KANPUR
3	RAJAHMUNDRY	29	BELGAUM	56	CUTTACK	83	MATHURA
4	VIJAYAWADA	30	KOLAR		PUNJAB	84	MEERUT
5	NELLORE	31	MANGALORE	57	AMRITSAR	85	MIRZAPUR
6	ELLURU	32	MYSORE	58	LUDHIANA	86	MORADABAD
7	GUNTUR	33	HUBLI-DHARWAR	59	PATIALA	87	RAMPUR
8	WARANGAL		KERALA	60	JULLANDHAR	88	SAHARANPUR
9	BANDAR	34	ERNAKULAM		RAJASTHAN	89	SAHAJAHANPUR
10	KURNOOL	35	TRIVENDRUM	61	AMER	90	VARANASI
11	KAKINADA	36	CALICUT	62	BHILWARA	91	JHANSI
	BIHAR	37	ALLEPPEY	63	JAIPUR	92	LUCKNOW
12	PATNA		MADHYA PR.	64	JODHPUR		WEST BENGAL
13	GAYA	38	INDORE	65	KOTA	93	ASANSOL
14	MUZAFFARPUR	39	JABALPUR	66	UDAIPUR	94	BARANAGAR
15	DARBHANGA	40	GWALIOR		TAMIL NADU	95	BHATPARA
16	BHAGALPUR	41	BHOPAL	67	VELLORE	96	BURAKAN
17	RANCHI	42	UJJAIN	68	TUTICORIN	97	CALCUTTA
18	JAMSHEDPUR	43	RAIPUR	69	TIRACHIRAPALLI	98	GARDEN REACH
	GUJARAT		MAHARASHTRA	70	THANJAVUR	99	HOWRAH
19	JAMNAGAR	44	GREATER BOMBAY	71	SALEM	100	KANHUTI
20	RAJKOT	45	POONA	72	NAGARCOIL	101	KHARAGPUR
21	BHAVNAGAR	46	SOLAPUR	73	MADURAI	102	S. DUMDUM
22	AHMEDABAD	47	NAGPUR	74	COIMBATORE	103	S. SUB-URBAN
23	SURAT	48	NASIK	75	MADRAS	104	DELHI
24	BARODA	49	ULHASNAGAR		UTTAR PRADESH	105	NEW DELHI
	HARYANA	50	KOLHAPUR	76	AGRA		
25	AMBALA	51	MALEGAON	77	ALIGARH		
	J&KASHMIR	52	AHMADNAGAR	78	ALLAHABAD		
26	JAMMU	53	AKOLA	79	BAREILLY		

Source: Census of India, 1961

5.1. Literacy rates in Class-I cities in 1961:

According to 1961 Census, the total literacy rate of India stood at 24.02% while that of the Class-I cities was 51.88%. The variation amongst the Class-I cities was huge ranging from Ernakulam in Kerala (63.6%) to Rampur in Uttar Pradesh (28.8%). The regional pattern that emerged depicts a distinctive North-South difference with higher levels of literacy in the southern parts of India. The cities of West Bengal, Punjab and Delhi stood as exceptions in the northern region. Within the southern region, the coastal areas, especially the western coast was marked by cities having higher literacy rates (Fig. 3). The male and female literacy levels display similar regional pattern, with male literacy being higher everywhere compared to female literacy. The

cities of Bihar and Orissa which had comparatively higher literacy rates in case of both total as well as male literacy had come up with medium to low literacy rates in case of female literacy. Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh had uniformly low literacy for both males and females.

The map for gender disparity in literacy is interesting to study because the distinctive regional variation stood conspicuous by its absence in case of gender disparity. The north-south distinction was far from sharp. The highest gender disparity was visible in the cities of Bihar and Rajasthan which were conventionally gender biased regions. Although gender disparity was quite low in the southern region, a sharp contrast with its northern counterpart was absent with regions like Punjab, U.P, and Delhi exhibiting similar lower disparity.

5.2. Literacy rates in Class – I cities in 1971:

During the 1971 Census, the literacy rates increased in case of the class-I cities to 57%. Despite the overall increase in literacy rates, the regional pattern remained almost similar while the north-south contrasts getting only sharper. The cities in the southern region performed much better in terms of increase in literacy rates. The male literacy rates are higher in the south-western coastal region as compared to the rest of the country. Although the female literacy rates increased from 41% to 48% in 1971, the regional pattern continued to follow the similar pattern, with the north-south distinction emerging out clearly. Kerala emerged as the only state with highest female literacy rates. The gender disparity pattern when superimposed over the regional pattern of total literacy brings forth a remarkable analysis that the regions which have low literacy rates are also the regions which have higher gender disparity in literacy and also the other way round.

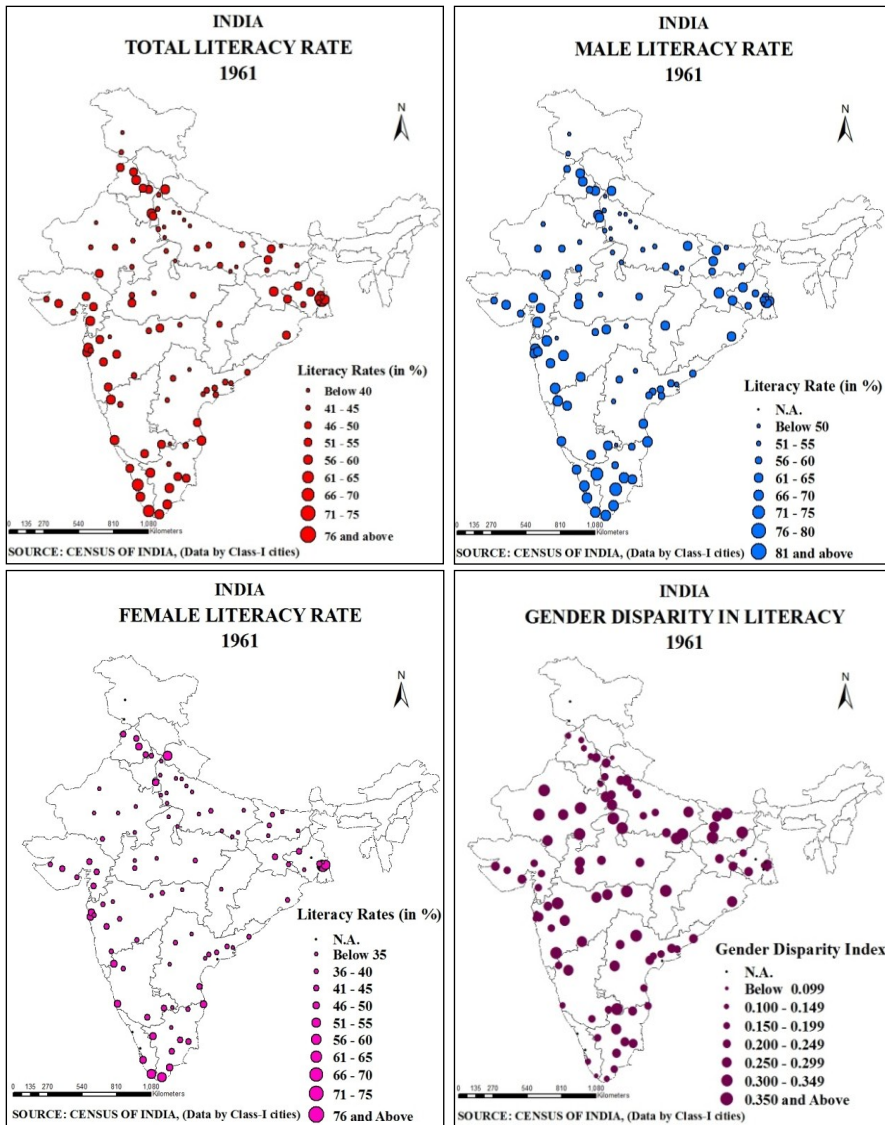


Fig. 3: Literacy in Class-I cities in India, 1961

Source: All maps prepared by the author from data computed from Census of India, 1961.

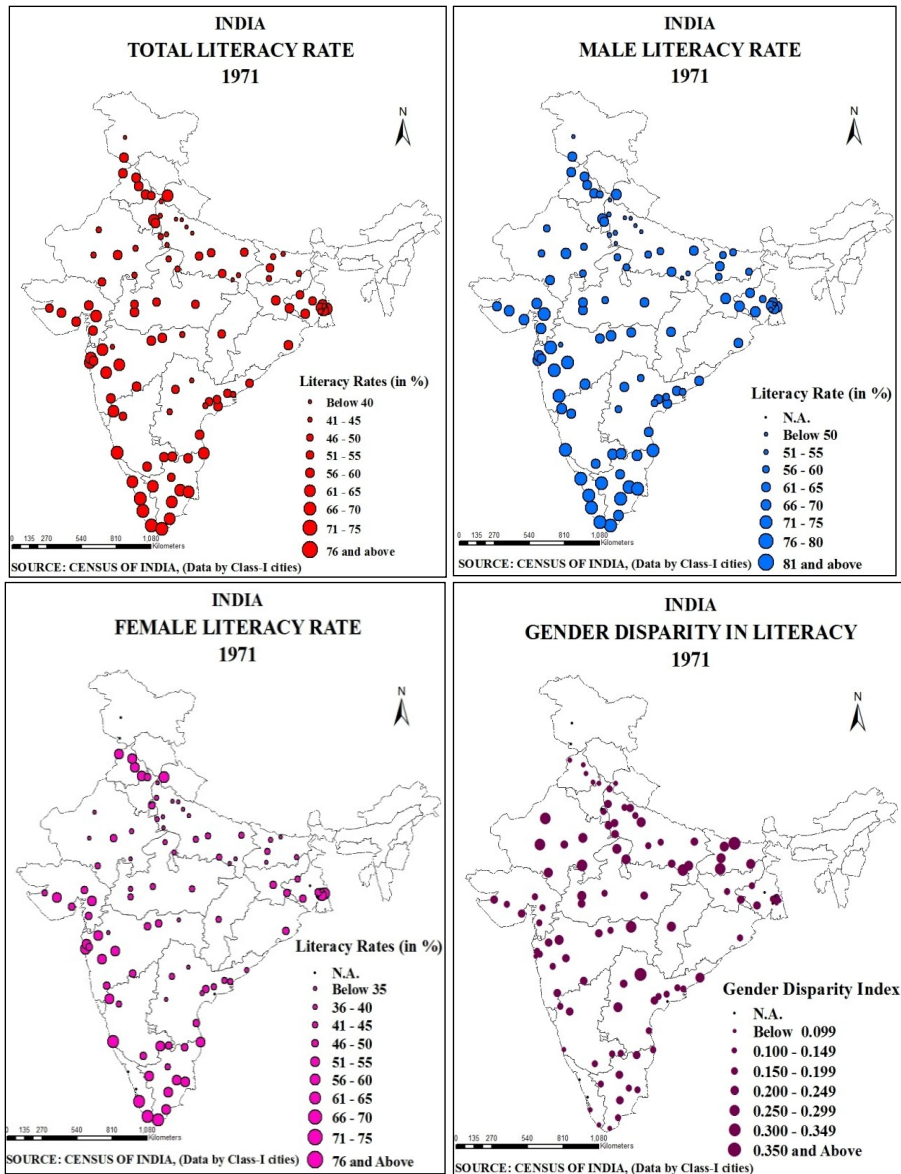


Fig. 4: Literacy in Class – I Cities in India, 1971

Source: All maps prepared by the author from data computed from Census of India, 1971.

5.3. Literacy rates in Class-I cities in 1981:

The 1981 Census announced the literacy rates in the Class-I cities as 62.26%, which marked a considerable rise from 57% in 1971. The spatial pattern of total and male literacy however stuck to that of their earlier versions. The cities of Bihar, Rajasthan, M.P. and U.P. displayed an overall lower literacy levels almost persistently. Female literacy made remarkable progress from 40.7% in 1961 to 54% in 1981 but the regional fixation continued to exist in the spatial pattern with highest literacy rates in the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal, Gujarat, etc, while lowest literacy existed in Bihar, Rajasthan, Orissa, M.P. and U.P. The gender disparity in literacy in the Class-I cities went down remarkably in the 1981 census, but the range of variation however increased while the regional pattern remained quite the same.

5.4. Literacy rates in Class-I cities in 1991:

The spatial pattern of city literacy in 1991 census was apparently similar to the earlier decades. The southern cities exhibited higher literacy rates in conformity with the north-south divide which remained quite prominent. The most conspicuous trait distinguished here was the declining status of Punjab with reference to total literacy. The literacy rates in the cities of Punjab witnessed a declining trend ever since 1961. Similar decline was witnessed in case of male literacy in Delhi and surrounding cities of U.P. The reason for this might be the increasing male selective migration in this region from rural areas, where illiteracy is widespread. In spite of tremendous increase in female literacy rates ever since 1961, the conventional low literacy regions of Bihar, Rajasthan, Orissa, M.P. and U.P had low female literacy even in their largest cities. The gender disparity in literacy in the cities have been rapidly decreasing but the regional disparity still remained high, with low disparity areas of Kerala being far below 0.099 and cities of Rajasthan with above 0.249 disparity. A remarkable decline was noticeable in gender disparity especially in case of Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, M.P. and Rajasthan.

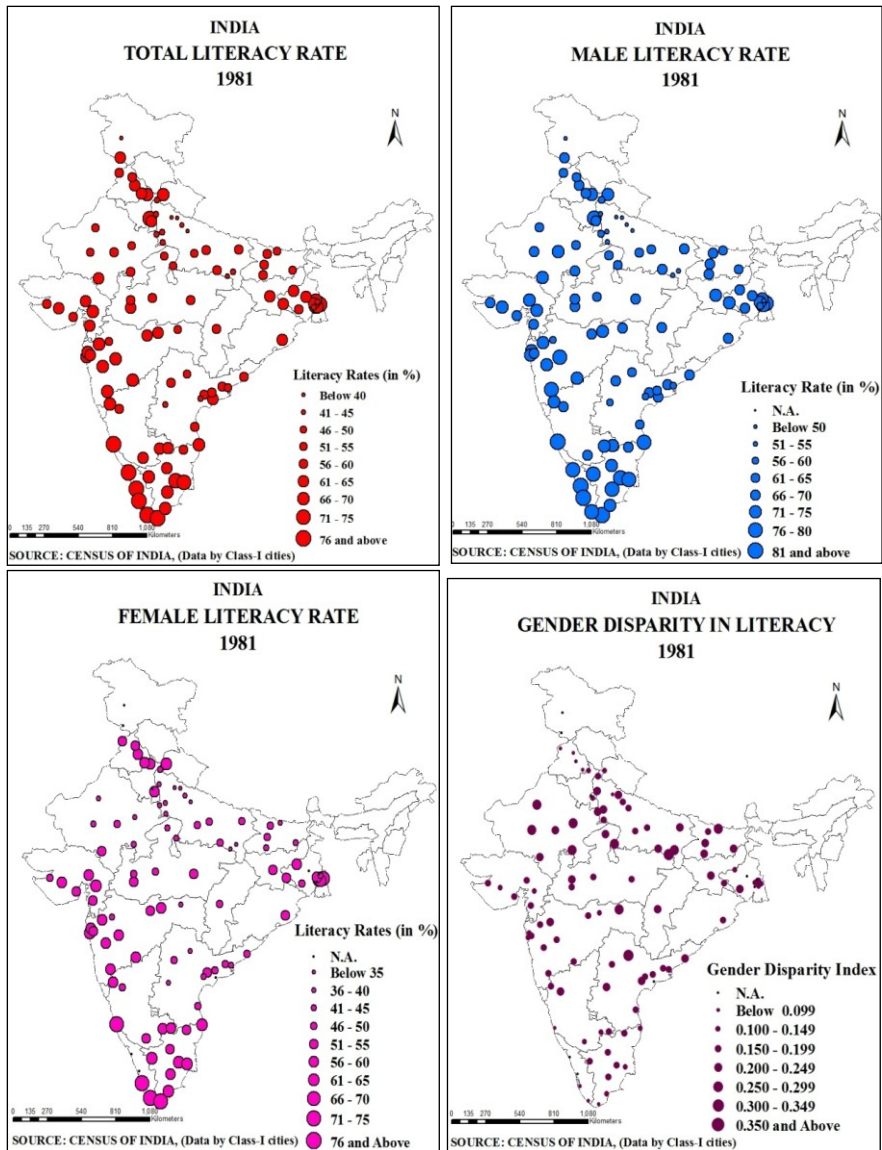


Fig. 5: Literacy in Class – I Cities in India, 1981

Source: All maps prepared by the author from data computed from Census of India, 1981.

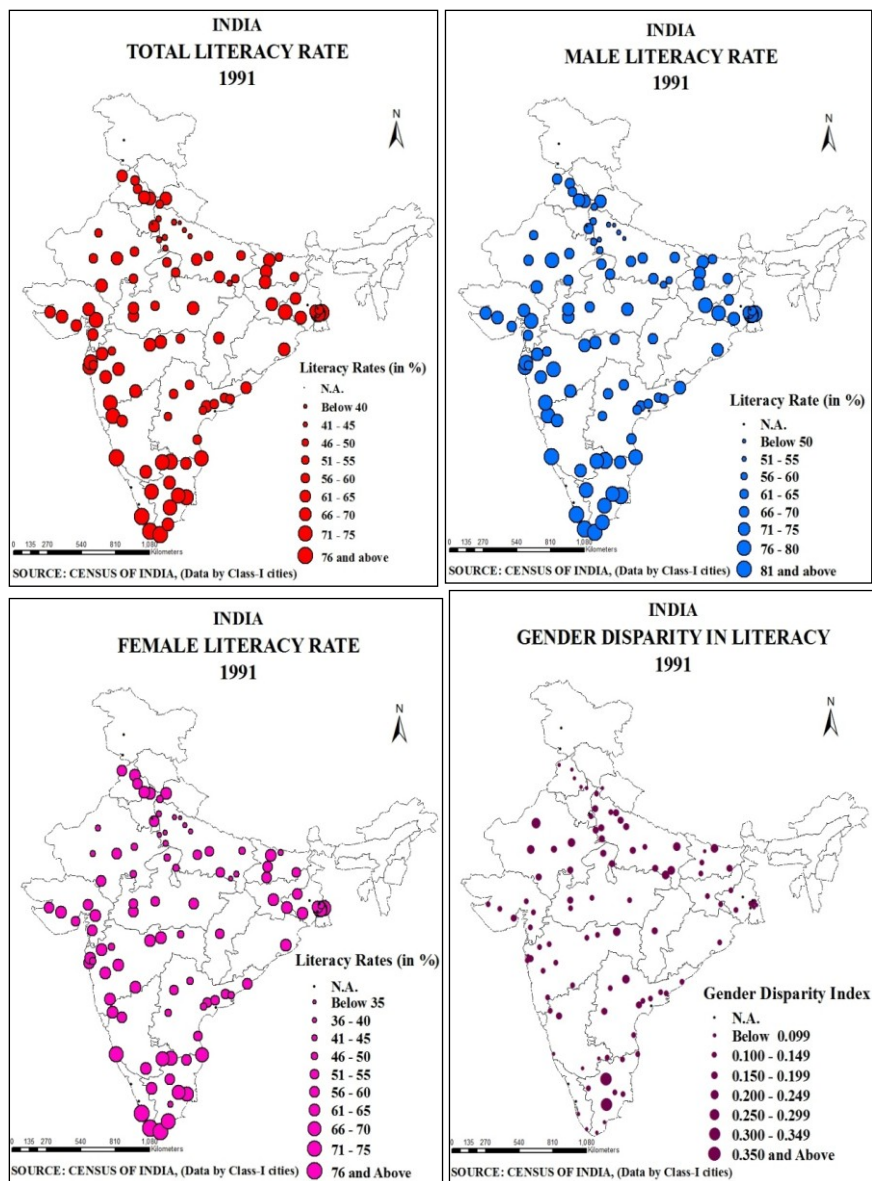


Fig. 6: Literacy in Class – I Cities in India, 1991

Source: All maps prepared by the author from data computed from Census of India, 1991.

5.5. Literacy rates in Class-I cities in 2001:

With about 65% of total literacy in 2001, the literacy scenario in India has definitely improved and the same trend can be witnessed in case of cities as well. There has been a tremendous growth in total literacy in class – I cities during 1991-2001. The cities in southern part of India show further improvement in total literacy, with the cities of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and a few cities of Maharashtra displaying a remarkable increase in literacy rates. The cities of northern India also improved. Cities such as Ambala, Allahabad, Muzaffarpur, Udaipur, etc. have shown drastic increase together with other cities of Gujarat and M.P. In case of male literacy, the same trend of improvement continues with special mention of cities of M.P. and Tamil Nadu where male literacy has shown a drastic positive change; however the condition of Delhi continues to decline. In case of female literacy also, there has been noteworthy development especially in case of cities of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu where female literacy has shifted to very high literacy category. Other cities which are worth mentioning in this regard are Dehradun, Ambala, Udaipur, Patna, Bhopal, Indore, etc.

The major interesting fact to be noted is all these cities are located in Northern India, which indicates that the distinct north-south divide which was still quite prominent in 1991 has faded away to a great extent. By 2001 the cities in north India have performed dramatically well which is evident from the gender disparity map of 2001 which shows low to moderate disparity, almost uniformly spread throughout the length and breadth of the country except for few pockets of high gender disparity in western Rajasthan and eastern U.P.

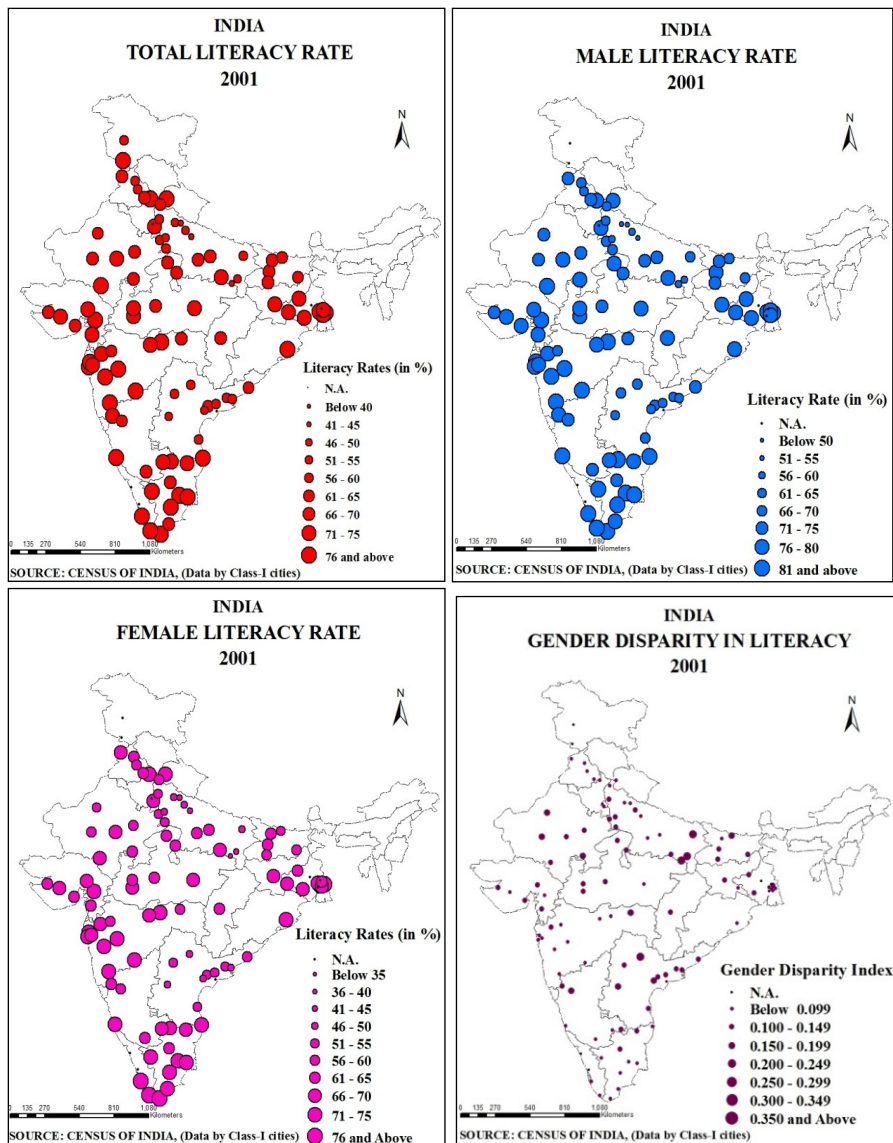


Fig. 7: Literacy in Class – I Cities in India, 2001

Source: All maps prepared by the author from data computed from Census of India, 2001.

6. Conclusion:

Deriving from the above analysis, we can clearly point out that, from 1961 to 1981 with literacy rates being comparatively lower, the gender disparity was quite high. There existed almost similar patterns

for both male and female literacy, with quite a distinct north-south divide excluding a few exceptions. The regional divide or contrast was quite sharp till 1981 which started fading away by 1991 and by 2001 the distinction almost vanished. The cities in northern India performed equally well as compared to their southern counterparts. The most redeeming feature is that with tremendous increase in literacy by 2001 the gender disparity has declined considerably. The decline in gender disparity pattern is quite uniform throughout the country except for a few pockets of high disparity. Thus, increase in literacy can be positively correlated with decrease in gender disparity in literacy.

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