



Interrogating the Educational Landscape: A Comprehensive Analysis of Girls' Schooling in West Bengal from 2011 to 2022

***Anupam Roy**

****Dr. Ayan Chakraborty**

* Student, Faculty of Education, JIS University

** Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, JIS University

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Email: **chakrabortyayan@gmail.com

Received 25/04/2025	Abstract <i>The educational landscape of girls' education in West Bengal is critically examined in this study, which also analyses the historical, sociocultural, and economic aspects that affect female education in the area. It highlights advancements and enduring obstacles as it examines societal attitudes towards girls' education, government policies, and infrastructure issues. The study examines enrolment rates, dropout trends, and the effects of programs like the Kanyashree Prakalpa using both qualitative and quantitative data. The results show notable gains in retention and access, but they also highlight issues including safety concerns, financial limitations, and discrimination based on gender. The purpose of this study is to support advocacy and policy debates for a more fair and inclusive educational system for girls in West Bengal.</i>
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Introduction

Education is a fundamental catalyst for societal development, contributing to economic prosperity, social equity, and individual empowerment. The educational status of women has emerged as a critical indicator of a nation's progress, reflecting its commitment to inclusivity and gender equality. This paper delves into the educational landscape of women in the Indian state of West Bengal, seeking to analyse trends, challenges, and opportunities that shape their academic journey. According to recent census data (Census of India, 2011), West Bengal stands as one of the most populous states in India, with a diverse cultural heritage. The state's commitment to education is evident through numerous initiatives and policies aimed at enhancing educational access and quality. However, despite progress in recent years, gender disparities persist in educational attainment, particularly among women. Gender-based educational inequalities have long-lasting implications for women's social and economic well-being (Sen, 2001). West Bengal's unique socio-cultural fabric, characterized by a blend of traditional values and progressive outlook,

offers a fascinating context to explore the multifaceted aspects of women's education. Understanding the educational status of women in West Bengal is crucial for designing effective policies and interventions to bridge existing gaps and promote inclusive development.

Review of Literature

The current investigation delves into the educational status of women in West Bengal, examining the data presented in various governmental Census Reports spanning from 1951 to 2011. Drawing insights from the 2011 Census, it reveals that the women's literacy rate in India stands at 65.46%, while in West Bengal, it demonstrates a commendable 71.16%. This suggests a satisfactory position for women's literacy in West Bengal compared to the national average, accompanied by a notable decrease in the gender gap. The overall literacy rate in West Bengal has witnessed a positive trajectory, ascending from 68.64% in 2001 to 77.08% in 2011, with Purba Medinipur emerging as the district with the highest literacy rate at 87.66%. West Bengal consistently outperforms the national average, securing the sixth position among major states in terms of literacy rates. However, it is crucial to note that the progress in literacy, particularly for women, has been relatively sluggish until the last decade. Despite this, the Census data reveals a substantial increase in the literacy rate of females in West Bengal, surging from 36.56% in 1981 to 46.56% in 1991, further advancing to 60.22% in 2001, and reaching 71.16% in 2011. This significant upward trend underscores a noteworthy improvement in female literacy rates in West Bengal, marking a transformative stride in the last few decades (Census Reports, 1951-2011).

Objectives of the Study

The primary aims of the investigation encompassed the following facets:

1. To analyse the current state of women's education in West Bengal, examining enrolment rates, literacy levels, and educational attainment across different age groups and socio-economic strata.
2. To examine the role of government policies and initiatives in promoting women's education in West Bengal, evaluating their effectiveness in addressing gender-based disparities and fostering inclusivity.
3. To investigate the challenges and barriers faced by women in West Bengal in pursuing education.
4. To provide recommendations based on research findings for policy interventions and strategies aimed at enhancing the educational status of women in West Bengal, fostering gender equity and empowering women through education.

Methodology of the Study

The information utilized in crafting this paper draws upon the National Achievement Survey (NAS) conducted in 2017, and 2021, alongside the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) spanning 2011-2022. This comprehensive dataset was employed to scrutinize and assess the educational growth and comprehension levels of students over the past decade. An intricate evaluation of these reports was conducted, employing critical analysis techniques and visual representations in the form of diagrams to elucidate significant disparities observed within the ten-year timeframe.

According to UNESCO "Literacy is a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading,

writing and using numbers throughout life and is part of a larger set of skills, which include digital skills, media literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship as well as job-specific skills.” India has made strides in literacy, reaching 74.04% in 2011 from a mere 12% in 1947. Despite this progress, the nation has not met the anticipated targets in the contemporary era. A significant factor contributing to the overall shortfall in literacy is the notable disparity between male and female literacy rates. As per the 2011 census, the literacy rate for men stood at 82.14%, whereas women lagged behind at 65.46%. This gender gap underscores a persistent challenge in achieving equitable literacy levels across both genders in India.

The multifaceted importance of education for women is evident in various aspects. Firstly, education serves as a crucial weapon in combating social crimes and injustices against women, such as Sati, female infanticide, dowry, and harmful traditional practices. An educated woman becomes a catalyst for change, standing up against injustices and influencing the beliefs of her family and society. Secondly, education fosters self-reliance, liberating women from dependence on others for survival. Awareness of rights and equal employment opportunities enhances financial independence, enabling women to challenge outdated social norms. Thirdly, female education elevates the standard of living by contributing to double wages within families, resulting in increased satisfaction and happiness. Additionally, promoting women's education in developing countries like India starts with creating awareness at the grassroots level. Construction of educational institutions and healthcare centres in villages, coupled with strict measures against crimes targeting women, fosters positive reactions towards women's education. Also, education prevents the social exclusion of women, reducing the likelihood of them engaging in menial jobs or falling victim to exploitative practices.

West Bengal in last one decade has grown exponentially in terms of enrolment of girls in the school level. The achievement can be attributed to the welfare schemes such as Kanyashree, Sabuj Sathi, Shikshashree, Sabujshree. Along with these schemes of Government of West Bengal, Schemes by Government of India such as Balika Samridhi Yojana, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao also fuelled the overall growth of girl child literacy. Particularly, The Kanyashree Prakalpa, initiated by the West Bengal Government, effectively tackles the significant societal challenges of girls dropping out of school and the prevalent issue of child marriage among them. This groundbreaking program operates as a conditional direct cash transfer initiative specifically designed for young girls belonging to economically disadvantaged families. This financial support not only assists in covering educational expenses but also serves as a crucial deterrent, reducing the likelihood of girls from impoverished families discontinuing their education prematurely.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

School Enrollment Details of Female Candidates

Table 1:

Year-2011					
Age Group (Only Girls)	Govt.	Pvt.	Other	Not in School	Total
7-10	88.3	8.3	1.4	2.0	100
11-14	91.9	2.4	1.5	4.3	100
15-16	82.6	2.0	1.3	14.2	100

Table 2:

Year-2012					
Age Group (Only Girls)	Govt.	Pvt.	Other	Not in School	Total
7-10	88.2	9.0	1.3	1.5	100
11-14	90.4	2.7	2.7	4.2	100
15-16	81.9	1.3	3.0	13.8	100

Table 3:

Year-2013					
Age Group (Only Girls)	Govt.	Pvt.	Other	Not in School	Total
7-10	89.6	8.3	1.6	0.5	100
11-14	91.9	2.0	2.2	4.0	100
15-16	84.6	1.0	1.6	12.8	100

Table 4:

Year-2014					
Age Group (Only Girls)	Govt.	Pvt.	Other	Not in School	Total
7-10	83.6	13.6	1.5	1.2	100
11-14	90.9	1.9	3.6	3.6	100
15-16	83.3	1.0	4.8	10.8	100

Table 5:

Year-2016					
Age Group (Only Girls)	Govt.	Pvt.	Other	Not in School	Total
7-10	86.4	10.9	1.1	1.7	100
11-14	93.1	2.2	2.9	1.8	100
15-16	89.8	1.2	3.0	6.0	100

Table 6:

Year-2018					
Age Group (Only Girls)	Govt.	Pvt.	Other	Not in School	Total
7-10	86.4	12.2	0.7	0.7	100
11-14	92.8	2.5	3.4	1.3	100
15-16	90.9	1.1	3.3	4.8	100

Table 7:

Year-2022					
Age Group (Only Girls)	Govt.	Pvt.	Other	Not in School	Total
7-10	90.9	8.2	0.6	0.3	100
11-14	95.0	2.5	1.8	0.7	100
15-16	94.2	1.5	1.7	2.6	100

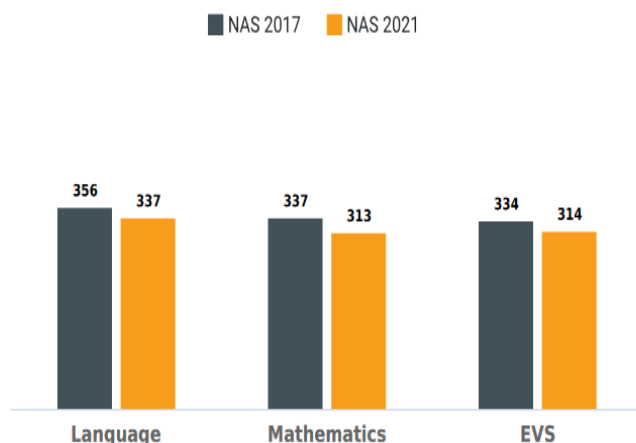
The provided tables present data on the educational enrolment of girls in different age groups (7-10, 11-14, and 15-16) over the years 2011 to 2022, categorized by types of schools (Government, Private, Other) and the percentage of girls not in school. It is clear that across all age groups, there is a noticeable improvement in the enrolment of girls over the years. The percentage of girls not in school has consistently decreased, indicating positive strides in educational accessibility. The data reveals that government school enrolment has remained relatively stable, with some fluctuations. Notably, in the age group 11-14, there is a consistent increase in enrolment from 90.4% in 2012 to 95.0% in 2022. This suggests a positive inclination towards government schools in this particular age bracket. Private school enrolment, while fluctuating, generally shows an increasing trend over the years. Notably, in the age group 15-16, there is a significant rise from 1.2% in 2016 to 1.5% in 2022. This may indicate a growing preference for private education among older girls. The category 'Other' exhibits variations, with some years showing a decrease while others show an increase. Notably, in the age group 7-10, there is a decline from 1.6% in 2013 to 0.6% in 2022. The nature of these 'Other' schools needs further exploration to understand the dynamics influencing enrolment. The percentage of girls not in school has consistently decreased across all age groups, showcasing an overall positive trend in educational inclusion. In the age group 15-16, there is a considerable reduction from 14.2% in 2011 to 2.6% in 2022, indicating improved efforts in minimizing educational exclusion for older girls.

While it is undeniable that there has been a surge in the involvement and registration of female students, one cannot overlook the discernible dip in the academic outcomes achieved by these women, a deviation from the commendable educational standards that the state of West Bengal had once set for itself. Regrettably, in numerous instances, the scholastic achievements of female students have failed to meet the erstwhile benchmarks established by the state. In fact, in several cases, there has been a palpable decrease in the educational proficiency exhibited by these women. This deviation from the previously attained excellence raises concerns about the efficacy of the current educational trajectory and calls for a meticulous examination of the factors contributing to this decline.

The ASER Report pertaining to the educational landscape of West Bengal in 2011 illuminates a concerning aspect: approximately 0.4% of 8th-grade students were found unable to decipher even the basic letters. However, the subsequent ASER Report for West Bengal in 2016 paints a more disconcerting picture, revealing a perceptible increase in this figure to 0.6%. A similar trajectory is discernible in the domain of Mathematics. In 2011, a substantial 25.9% of 8th-grade students demonstrated proficiency in subtraction, but the 2016 report indicates a decline to

a mere 21.2% in this crucial skill. The intricacies of the ASER data bring to the fore a disheartening narrative – in the majority of instances, the educational outcomes in West Bengal, as gauged by ASER, have witnessed a downturn.

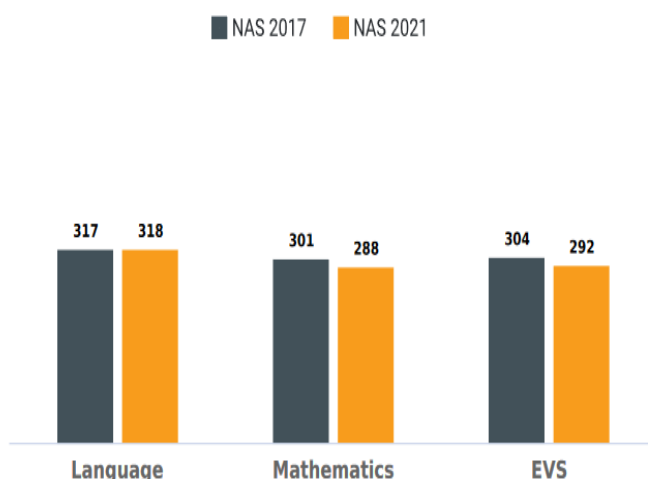
Performance of Students in NAS 2017 and NAS 2021 (in scaled scores out of 500)



* EVS - Environmental Studies

As unveiled by the National Achievement Survey (NAS) of 2021, there is an unequivocal revelation that the educational standing of the state of West Bengal, particularly in the context of Class 3, has regrettably descended from its prior commendable standards. The discernible dip is evident across all academic domains, encompassing language, Mathematics, and Environmental Studies (EVS). The numerical representation of this decline is stark, witnessing a decrement from the erstwhile scores of 356 to 337 in language, 337 to 313 in Mathematics, and 313 to 314 in EVS.

Performance of Students in NAS 2017 and NAS 2021 (in scaled scores out of 500)

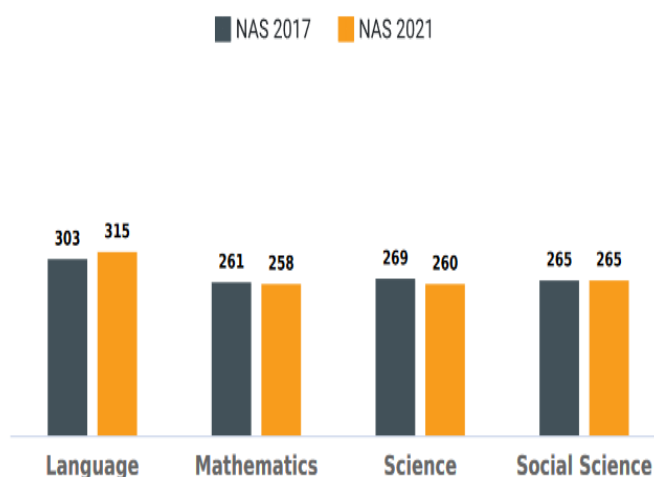


* EVS - Environmental Studies

Examining the academic landscape through the prism of Class 5 in the state of West Bengal reveals a relatively less disheartening scenario compared to its Class 3 counterpart. While the improvement in language scores offers a glimmer of positivity, showcasing an ascent from 317 to

318, the overall picture remains nuanced. The proficiency in Mathematics and Environmental Studies (EVS), unfortunately, paints a contrasting narrative. The numerical indices tell the tale of a decrement, witnessing a decline from the previous benchmarks of 301 to 288 in Mathematics and 304 to 292 in EVS.

Performance of Students in NAS 2017 and NAS 2021 (in scaled scores out of 500)



Delving into the educational dynamics of Class 8, as illuminated by the NAS 2021 findings, The discernible trajectory showcases a commendable upswing in language proficiency, where scores have ascended from 303 to 315. In the realm of Social Science, the scores, however, maintain a status quo, stagnating at 265. The intricacies of the NAS data unfurl a narrative of concern as one shifts his/her gaze to Mathematics and Science. Here, the numeric indicators tell a tale of decline, with scores witnessing a dip from the previous benchmarks of 261 to 258 in Mathematics and 269 to 260 in Science.

When considering the educational landscape for female students, the discernible patterns paint a relatively positive picture. According to the NAS 2021 data, the performance of 8th-grade female students reveals commendable achievements, with a noteworthy 43% showcasing correctness at the advanced level – a figure surpassing the national average of 36%. However, a closer examination unveils a nuanced narrative. While a substantial 25% demonstrate proficiency in mathematics at the advanced level, this proportion falls slightly below the national average of 26%. Delving into the historical context provided by NAS 2017, the overall performance of female students was marked by scores of 54 for language, 38 for mathematics, 40 for science, and 37 for social science. The latest NAS 2021, however, showcases a noteworthy improvement in language, science, and social science, with scores escalating to 56, 41, and 41, respectively. Despite these positive strides, the domain of mathematics exhibits a contrary trend, witnessing a dip in the score to 35.

The comprehensive evaluation stemming from both the ASER and NAS reports illuminates West Bengal's commendable strides in the realm of women's education. However, beneath this veneer of achievement lies a disconcerting revelation – the state grapples with inefficiency standards that pose a significant challenge to its educational system. Beyond the unsatisfactory physical infrastructure and the inadequacy of Teaching-Learning Materials (TLMs), the focal point

of concern is the deficiency in teacher training. Yet, what emerges as the proverbial Achilles' heel for West Bengal's education system is the persistent irregularities in teacher recruitment processes and the utilization of funds. This quagmire is further exacerbated by a notorious scandal, involving the irregular recruitment of teachers and misappropriation of funds, amounting to crores of rupees. Remarkably, the scandal has gained such negative notoriety that it casts a shadow over the accomplishments in women's education. The profound impact of this teacher recruitment irregularities scam not only tarnishes the state's educational reputation but also serves as a stark reminder of the systemic flaws that undermine the very foundation of West Bengal's educational framework. In a rather paradoxical turn, the magnitude of this scandal has overshadowed another pressing issue – the sporadic yet existent incidents of paper leaks within the examination system. Though not on a massive scale, these leaks have been clandestine contributors to the broader examination scams.

Remedies

Strategies for addressing challenges in education in West Bengal include implementing the RTE Act, 2009, with a comprehensive roadmap, such as formulating State RTE Rules, fixing neighbourhood limits, and ensuring teacher recruitment aligns with PTR guidelines. The revised SSA framework focuses on holistic education, equity, access, gender concerns, and teacher centrality. Emphasis is placed on functional literacy, especially adult literacy, through initiatives like the National Literacy Mission and Sakshar Bharat Mission.

To enhance enrolment and retention in rural schools, the government launched Bharati Sunischitkaran Karmasuchi-2007, targeting out-of-school children, with special provisions for girls, minorities, and disadvantaged groups. The RTE-aligned SSA is working towards improving school infrastructure, emphasizing ICT-based facilities. Special measures in educationally backward blocks include converting schools into Residential School Complexes and providing support to socially deprived children.

Addressing the shortage of primary schools in remote rural areas, the establishment of 1,557 new primary schools and 14,165 Upper Primary Schools is proposed by 2010-11 to ensure adequate access within 1 km. of habitation in West Bengal's rural areas.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that the West Bengal government social schemes have really turned matrix of women education in the state. But the problems the data beckons us to ponder not just on the quantity of participation but also on the quality of learning outcomes, urging a re-evaluation and rejuvenation of the educational landscape to restore West Bengal to its erstwhile educational eminence.

The stats urge a closer examination of the factors propelling the positive surge in language proficiency, the factors contributing to the stagnation in social science, and the intricate challenges leading to the decrement in Mathematics and Science scores. Such a comprehensive perspective, in students' linguistic finesse, underscores the need for tailored educational interventions to sustain and fortify the positive strides while addressing the impediments that may hinder progress in specific academic domains within the educational sphere of West Bengal's school education.

The data also underscore the imperative not only to scrutinize the statistical nuances but

also to reflect upon the pedagogical methods and systemic issues contributing to this regrettable dip in educational attainment. It serves as a clarion call for a thorough examination of the prevailing educational strategies and the implementation of targeted interventions to reverse this unsettling trend and restore West Bengal to its erstwhile status of educational excellence.

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