

A Surprising Exception

Himachal's Success in Promoting Female Education¹

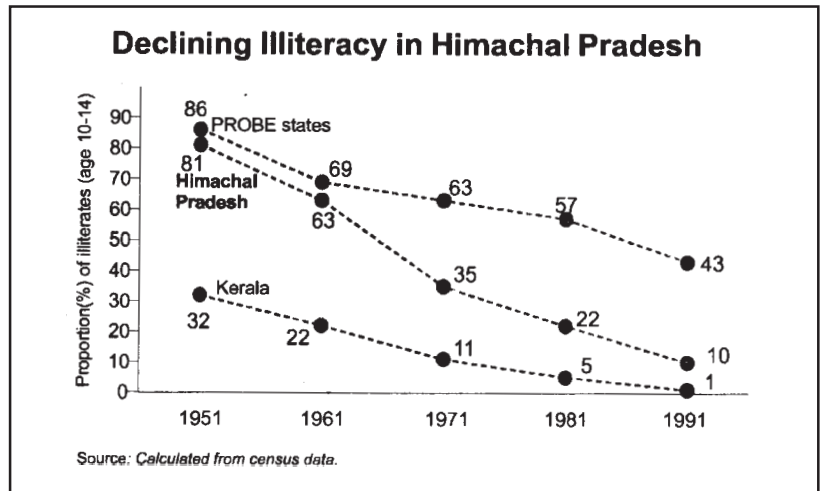
○ Jean Drèze

GENDER inequalities in India derive partly from the economic dependence of women on men. Women tend to own little property, and though they make an enormous contribution to the economy, most of it takes the form of unremunerated family labour. This economic vulnerability undermines women's bargaining power within the household as well as in the society at large. Low levels of formal education among women reinforce the asymmetry of power between men and women. This is one reason, among others, why female education contributes not only to general economic development and social progress but also to gender equality. The process is self-reinforcing, as greater gender equality, in turn, facilitates the participation of girls in the schooling system.

Schooling Patterns

As everyone knows, education levels are much lower among women than among men in most Indian states. At the time of the 1991 census, for instance, the literacy rate among women aged seven and above was only 39 per cent, compared to 64 per cent among men. This gender bias is exceptionally large by international standards. According to *Human*

¹ This article draws on the recently-released *Public Report on Basic Education in India* (The PROBE Team, 1999). The author is a member of the PROBE Team.



Development Report 1998 (pp. 131-3), only five countries in the world have a larger male-female

literacy gap than India: Bhutan, Syria, Togo, Malawi and Mozambique. Rajasthan alone has as large a population as these five countries combined, and *no* country in the world has a higher male-female literacy gap than Rajasthan.

One striking exception to this general pattern of sharp gender bias is Himachal Pradesh, where school participation rates are almost as high for girls as for boys (see Table 1). This achievement has to be seen in the context of Himachal Pradesh's spectacular transition towards universal elementary education (The PROBE Team, 1999). Fifty years ago, educational levels in Himachal Pradesh were no higher than in, say, Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. Today, Himachal Pradesh is second only to Kerala in terms of school

TABLE - 1		
School Participation in Himachal Pradesh, 1996		
Percentage distribution of children aged 6-14 by schooling status:		
	Boys	Girls
Currently-enrolled	97	95
Never-enrolled	1	2
Drop-out	2	3
Total	100	100

Source: PROBE survey (The PROBE Team, 1999, p.116)

participation and literacy rates in the younger age groups. At the primary level, school participation is close to universal, for girls as well as boys. And while a gender bias persists at higher levels of education, it is much lower than elsewhere in India, and rapidly declining.

It is interesting to note that these patterns also apply, to some extent, to the hill region of Uttar Pradesh. The latter has lower levels of school participation than Himachal Pradesh, but it is not far behind. In the more advanced districts of Uttarakhand, such as Garhwal, the situation is much the same as in Himachal Pradesh. This is all the more impressive in contrast with other parts of Uttar Pradesh, one of India's most educationally backward states. The fact that female school participation is rising so rapidly in Uttarakhand as well as in Himachal Pradesh suggests that this common trend relates not just to state policy but also to the distinctive historical, cultural and socio-economic features of the hill region.

Women's Economic Role

One of these distinctive features is a high level of female labour-force participation: women's involvement in economic activities outside the household is much higher in Himachal Pradesh than elsewhere in north India (see Table 2).² This feature, in turn, can be related to specific aspects of the hill economy. At the risk of simplifying, a basic contrast can be drawn between the densely-populated,



land-scarce, surplus-labour economy of the Gangetic plain, and the hill economy where the scarcity of land and other natural resources is less pronounced. In the former, women tend to be confined to the household, though their labour power is mobilised at times of peak agricultural activity such as harvest seasons. In the hill economy, where

TABLE - 2

Gender-Related Indicators:
Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh

	Himachal Pradesh	Haryana	Uttar Pradesh
Female-male ratio, 1991 (females per 1,000 males)	976	865	879
Proportion of female workers in the female population, 1991 (%)	35	11	13
Ratio of female to male child mortality, 1991 (%)	88.2	106.7	115.7
Proportion of girls aged 6-10 who are out of school, 1992-3 (%)	11	22	50
Married women as a proportion of all women aged 15-19, 1991 (%)	18	29	32
Total fertility rate, 1991	3.1	4.0	5.1
Proportion of births preceded by ante-natal checkup, 1992-3 (%)	74	67	30

Source: Compiled from Census of India 1991; National Family Health Survey 1992-3; Drèze and Sen (1995), Statistical Appendix; *Sample Registration System 1991*.

² The proportion of women counted as "workers" by the 1991 census is higher in Himachal Pradesh than in any major state except Andhra Pradesh. Female labour force participation rates in Uttarakhand are even higher than in Himachal Pradesh (Nanda, 1991, Tables 5 and 6).

natural resources such as forests and pastures (if not cultivable land) are relatively abundant, there is greater scope for labour absorption, and women's labour power tends to be mobilised on a larger scale. This tradition of high female labour-force participation has also helped women's involvement in the modern economy and society. Visiting Himachal Pradesh from, say, western Uttar Pradesh or Haryana, one is struck by the lively and confident presence of so many Himachali women in public spaces from village commons and local markets to bus stands, tea shops, cinema halls and government offices.

A high level of female labour-force participation is not necessarily a sign of greater gender equality. Depending on the conditions of employment, work outside the household can even represent an additional burden for women. High levels of female labour-force participation, however, do have a number of positive social influences. For instance, they tend to reduce anti-female discrimination within the family, as daughters are viewed in a more positive light and adult women have more bargaining power (Sunita Kishor, 1993; Mamta Murthi *et al.*, 1995). Women's involvement in the work force is also a crucial entry point for greater involvement in public life as a whole, including local



politics. There are many other possible social ramifications, some of which are still poorly understood. For instance, inter-regional variations within India suggest that high levels of female labour force participation are associated with low crime rates (Drèze and Khera, 1999). A society where women are actively involved in the economy as well as in public life is likely to be quite different, in many fundamental respects, from a society where most of them are confined to domestic work.

As far as education is concerned, there are several positive connections between women's work opportunities and girl's schooling. First, a high level of female labour-force participation raises the economic returns to female education. As the PROBE investigators noted, Himachali parents tend to have relatively high hopes as far as their daughters' future employment opportunities are concerned, and young girls themselves have ambitious aspirations. Second, in so far as women's labour-force participation boosts their influence in the family, schooling

decisions are likely to be less male-centered. Third, a similar connection may also operate at the level of the society as a whole, with girl's schooling receiving more attention (not only from parents but also, in public policy) where women are more involved in the public sphere. Fourth, if women are used to participating in a wide range of economic activities, it is that much easier to involve them in the teaching profession, too. The proportion of female teachers in Himachal Pradesh (above 40 per cent at the primary level, in rural areas) is indeed much higher than in other north Indian states (about 20 per cent). This, in turn, is likely to facilitate school participation among girls. Fifth, social acceptance of the presence of women in the public sphere makes it easier for adolescent girls to attend school outside their own village, if need be. Elsewhere in north India, parental reluctance to allow adolescent daughters to leave the village (often for objective reasons of physical insecurity) is a common problem. Last but not least, in so far as women's labour-force participation

³ Together with these positive links between women's work and girls' schooling, one also has to consider possible negative links, notably the burden of domestic work on elder daughters in families where both parents are working outside the household. How this particular obstacle has been overcome in Himachal Pradesh (where the incidence of female child labour used to be quite high) is an interesting direction of further enquiry.

reduces gender inequality in general, it is also likely to promote positive attitudes towards girls' schooling.³

Marriage Practices

Another distinctive feature of Himachali society concerns marriage practices. These have an important bearing on schooling decisions, since marriage is a major focus of the upbringing of daughters in north India.

Marriage practices in north India typically include the following: (1) a dowry has to be paid by the bride's family, (2) after marriage, a woman leaves her own family to join her husband's, often in a distant village, and (3) women are expected to marry men of a higher status, e.g. in terms of educational qualifications. These patriarchal norms (imparted by the ideology of *kanyadaan*) create profound asymmetries between the marriage of a son and that of a daughter, which get reflected in their respective upbringings. In Himachal Pradesh, however, these norms tend to be relatively flexible. While dowry is a common practice, for instance, it takes a less rigid form than in other parts of the northern region. In fact, bride-price is also common, and not so long ago it was probably more widespread than dowry. Similarly, the alienation of a married woman from her natal home is less drastic in Himachal Pradesh than elsewhere in north India: adult women retain close bonds with their parents and brothers, and visit them regularly. The notion of hierarchy between

in-laws (with the groom's family occupying the higher position) is also relatively weak in Himachal Pradesh.

As with female labour force participation, there are many ways in which the more symmetric nature of marriage practices in Himachal Pradesh is likely to have a positive influence on girls' schooling. Elsewhere in north India, parents often feel that they have little stake in educating girls, since daughters are expected to leave the family after marriage. In Himachal Pradesh, where parents retain stronger bonds with married daughters, there is greater concern for the well-being of a daughter after marriage, and a sense that education contributes to it. Similarly, the fact that Himachali daughters need not "marry up" relieves parents of the possible concern that a well-educated daughter may be difficult to marry. This concern is often expressed by other north Indian parents, especially in communities with low levels of *male* education, where it would be particularly difficult to find a "suitable" husband for a well-educated daughter.⁴

These positive features of gender relations in Himachal Pradesh emerge with great clarity in a recent comparative study of the status of women in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh (Marie-Eve Bondroit, 1998). The same study also brings out how relatively equal gender relations in Himachal Pradesh have helped to foster a positive attitude towards the schooling of girls (*see* box on page 10).

Public Involvement

Aside from this favourable social context, public action has played a key role in the expansion of girl's schooling in Himachal Pradesh. The state government has a long-standing commitment to the promotion of elementary education, with a special emphasis on girls' education. Special incentives have been introduced for female pupils. Female teachers have been posted in most schools. And the state has an active network of anganwadis, which makes it easier for working women to send their daughters to school. Public action at the village-level is also less male-dominated than in other parts of north India. For instance, many villages have an



Photo: K.T. RAVINDRAN

⁴ The material, cultural and historical roots of this contrast in marriage practices are yet to be fully explored. Here again, the high level of female labour force participation in Himachal Pradesh may be an important part for the story.

Gender Relations and Schooling: Himachal Pradesh vs Haryana

Marie-Eve Bondroit

Himachal Pradesh and Haryana present an interesting contrast. Economic conditions in these two states are quite similar, but gender relations differ a great deal. To help understand this contrast, and how it affects girls' schooling, I conducted detailed interviews with 38 mothers in Manhendranagar district (Haryana), and another 38 mothers in Solan and Sirmour districts (Himachal Pradesh). Here are some findings and impressions from these interviews:

- In both states, the mothers interviewed were unanimous in saying that education was important for girls. One motive, particularly common in Himachal Pradesh (HP), is that educated girls are likely to find better jobs: 36 out of 38 respondents in HP expected their daughters to work outside the home after marriage. In both states, education was also considered to have value in itself: educated women were said to have more independence, greater self-confidence, and more freedom to move outside the village. In Haryana (where two thirds of the respondents had no other occupation than household work), women often mentioned that education improves marriage prospects, and helps mothers to run a household.
- Only three of the respondents' daughters had never been to school. All three lived in Haryana. Maternal literacy was higher in HP than in Haryana, even though literacy rates in the preceding generation (i.e. the respondents' own mothers) were similar. This confirms that the expansion of schooling has been more rapid in Himachal Pradesh. HP mothers were also more knowledgeable about schooling matters than their counterparts in Haryana. The latter only had a vague idea of the functioning of the local school (e.g. how many days it had been open in the preceding week).
- Schooling facilities were not very different in the two states (though average distance from home to school is higher in Himachal Pradesh). Teaching standards, however, seem to differ. For instance, in Haryana several mothers complained that teachers spent time playing cards or knitting during school hours.
- Marriage customs in both states are similar in many respects (e.g. practice of dowry and patrilocal residence). But there are a few noticeable contrasts. Almost all Haryana mothers consider it preferable for a young couple to live with the husband's joint family, but less than half of HP mothers share that view. Similarly, 26 out of 38 respondents in Haryana would like their daughter to marry before the age of 21, but only 9 mothers in HP feel the same. Again, the idea that a daughter might marry someone with less education than herself was considered unthinkable in Haryana, but quite acceptable in HP. Most striking is the difference in relations between parents and daughters after marriage. Thirteen mothers in HP had seen their parents 10 times or more during the preceding two years, compared with only four mothers in Haryana.
- Generally, I found less inequality between men and women in HP than in Haryana. Mothers in HP have more say in household decisions. This applies in particular to education: many mothers in Haryana had no idea of the cost of schooling, and considered this to be their husband's business. One woman in Haryana prefaced most of her responses with "my husband thinks...". The power of parents-in-law in the household was also much greater in Haryana than in HP.

In Haryana, the hold of patriarchal values pervaded women's own outlook. In response to a question about the age at which a daughter should be married, one mother bluntly said: "Daughters are a burden—the sooner you get rid of them, the better."

active *mahila mandal* (women's group), in addition to the standard *gram panchayat*. In some areas, male out-migration has further enhanced the role of women in local affairs. It is reasonable to expect that this has led to greater attention being paid by village communities to matters of schooling in general, and to girls' schooling in particular.

The catalytic role of state initiatives helps to understand why some other areas, where gender relations and social conditions have much the same features as in Himachal Pradesh, have failed to experience a similar transformation of schooling patterns. The tribal communities of central India, for instance, also have high levels of

female labour force participation as well as relatively symmetric marriage practices. These communities, however, tend to be politically marginalised, and to be deprived of minimal schooling facilities. As a result, school participation in tribal communities is often low, and the schooling of tribal girls is a special casualty. Interestingly, however,

the situation is quite different in tribal communities that happen to have benefited from a major expansion of schooling facilities, due either to their political bargaining power (as in much of the North-east) or to missionary efforts (as in parts of south Bihar). Schooling patterns in these communities have much in common with those found in Himachal Pradesh, including high participation and a relatively small gender bias.

A key question remains as to why elementary education has received much higher priority from the government in Himachal Pradesh than in other north Indian states. A speculative answer is that, in the latter states, democracy has been derailed by pervasive social inequalities. Consider for instance Uttar Pradesh. As many studies have documented, village society in Uttar Pradesh remains intensely feudal, divided and crime-ridden. The elitist tendencies tend to consolidate themselves as one moves to higher levels of governance, from the village to the state government. The latter is deeply alienated from the grassroots and shows little concern for the basic needs of ordinary people. In Himachal Pradesh, on the other hand, the divisions of class, caste and gender are less pronounced. This aspect of the social structure, together with the fact that Himachal Pradesh is a small state, may have reduced the social distance that separates political leaders from the public.

In Conclusion

The schooling revolution in Himachal Pradesh has done a great deal to make it a better place to live in. In the wake of this revolution, the region has witnessed an impressive reduction of poverty,



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mortality, illness, undernutrition and related deprivations. Aside from this, it is a joy to see self-confident children who take pride in what they have learnt at school, and have high hopes for the future.

Against a background of persistent deprivation and inequality in most other states, there is much to learn from this positive experience. Of course, Himachal Pradesh's success cannot be "replicated" elsewhere,



Photo: PROBE TEAM

irrespective of the social context. Nevertheless, it helps to identify possibilities for action. The schooling revolution in Himachal Pradesh also draws our attention to the general connection between gender equality and development. This may sound like a worn-out theme, but the truth is that we have only begun to understand it. □

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