

DESPITE evidence indicating high returns to the society for providing girls with primary education, the bias against sending girls to school continues to hold strong, especially in rural India. The persistent disparity in literacy levels between males and females in India is well documented. The 1991 Census confirms that the literacy rate for females (39 percent) is significantly lower than that for males (64 percent). The government definition of literacy, however, sets such a low standard that being "literate" doesn't necessarily enable a person to read and write.

This paper draws upon observations made concerning gender and primary education during in-depth rural surveys recently conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) in the states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

The population in all six villages except for Gharalwadi in Maharashtra is ethnically diverse.¹ Both the villages of Madhya Pradesh and Thervazhi village of Tamil Nadu are fully accessible to larger hubs. Chinchkheda village of Maharashtra and Kanur village of Tamil Nadu, though only at a distance of 11 and 20 kilometers away from their respective *tehsils* (subdivisions), are difficult to reach due to poor commuting facilities. Gharalwadi is located in a remote area in terms of both physical distance and transport facilities.

In all six villages, a total of 32 girls and 30 boys were interviewed.² The criterion for selecting the children

1. Since the in-depth rural survey was carried out in only two villages per state, judging the performance of the states or districts on the basis of the village (or vice-versa) would be highly inappropriate and best avoided.
2. These numbers do not reflect the genderwise distribution of dropouts in the villages, since the selection has not been based on systematic sampling.

Why they Drop Out

Reasons for Lower Literacy Among Girls

Veena Kulkarni



was very informal; villagers were asked to introduce us to children between the ages of 10 and 14 who had dropped out of school, preferably those who had discontinued school recently. We also collected household

In all the villages studied and especially the ones in Tamil Nadu, parents felt insecure about sending their daughters to school if it required traversing empty fields.

information of the respondents relating to the economic and social background of the families, literacy levels of parents, and educational status of siblings.

Although it required a lot of persuasion before the children overcame their diffidence, in the end, the interviews went off well. Most of the children's parents worked as agricultural cultivators or wage labourers, but there were also a few instances of parents who were non-agricultural wage labourers or who had salaried jobs. The educational level of the parents was generally very low. Mothers were

overwhelmingly illiterate with some exceptions in the two villages of Tamil Nadu, where we found mothers who had been educated up to class nine.

Crossing Empty Fields

The lack of conveniently located and/or adequately equipped schools seem to be playing a major role in influencing the dropout rate of village children. Parents in all six villages generally said that they educated their girls up to whatever level the village school provided. In Golwa, Madhya Pradesh, the practice of sending girls to school beyond class seven was almost absent. In Digma, too, where the primary school only went up to class five, very few girls studying beyond class five could be found. The story in the two villages of Tamil Nadu was not very different: in Thervazhi village, although the middle school was at a walkable distance, very few girls were enrolled and in Kanur, where the village school taught up to the eighth standard, the majority of girls reached the middle level.

In all the villages studied and especially the ones in Tamil Nadu, parents felt insecure about sending their daughters to school if it required traversing empty fields. This element of danger was felt more acutely once girls attained puberty.

For example, in Digma, which is spread over several acres, the parents thought it was too risky to let their girls walk the two to three kilometers to school. The residents of the three hamlets of Gharalwadi, Katekarwadi and Duddhewadi, faced similar problems. Because of the high dropout rate among girls, the lack of female company for those remaining in school beyond class eight is another discouraging factor.

Shifting Priorities

The reasons given by the children for dropping out of school can be

Table 1*

<i>State</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Village</i>	<i>Population (1991)</i>
Madhya Pradesh	Ujjain Sarguja	Golwa	1389
		Digma	1351
Maharashtra	Jalna Satara	Chinchkheda	1351
		Gharalwadi	980
Tamil Nadu	Chengalpattu MGR Pasumpon Muthera- malungam Thevar (PMT)	Thervazhi	1645
		Kanur	1429

* Since the in-depth rural survey was carried out in only two villages per state, the performance of the states and districts on the basis of the village or vice versa are highly inappropriate and need to be avoided.

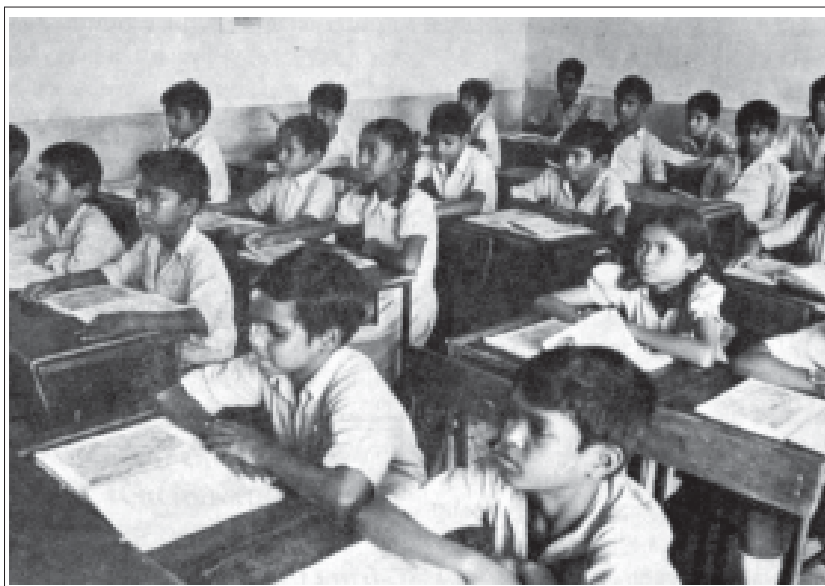
categorised as:

- reasons specific to the child
- social pressure
- family circumstances.

Out of the variety of explanations children gave for dropping out, the reason reported most spontaneously was considered primary. Reasons specific to the child include illness or handicap and an inability to cope with or disinterest in studies. All of these reasons, however, seemed to stem primarily from poverty rather than from any inherent incapacity to learn. Social pressure is defined as discouraging

and/or discriminating attitudes of parents, teachers, relatives, and peers. Births and deaths in the family, financial crises, economic necessity for a child to do household chores or work on the family farm/business, or to take a job as a paid labourer comprise the third category. Although sometimes similar for both girls and boys, the above reasons generally led many more girls than boys to drop out.

A child's occupation and earnings are important factors in the status that he/she acquires both within and outside the household. Many parents



Classroom in a village school

Table 2
Location and Availability of the Village Schools* in the Six Selected Villages

State	Village	Primary School	Middle School [†]
Madhya Pradesh	Golwa	One government school Class I to V in the centre of the village.	One government school Class VI to VIII on the outskirts of the village.
Madhya Pradesh	Digma	One government school from Class I to V located near the tribal cluster of houses; one government-aided school.	One government aided school from Class I to X, which is however dysfunctional beyond Class VI.
Maharashtra	Chinchkheda	One government school from Class I to VII located away from the conglomeration of houses but at a distance of only a few furlongs.	One government school up to Class VII.
Maharashtra	Gharalwadi	One government school from Class I to IV located at the entrance of Gharalwadi, one government school for children studying in Class I and II.	One government school from Class V to VII at a distance of two kilometres from the hamlets Katekarwadi and Duddhdewadi. One government aided school from Class V to X at a distance of two kilometres from Gharalwadi and three to four kilometres from Duddhdewadi.
Tamil Nadu	Thervazhi	One government primary school up to Class V situated centrally in the village.	Government and other schools at Gummudipundi which is two kilometres away from the village and is well connected by public transport facilities.
Tamil Nadu	Kanur	One government school which is located at a convenient place.	Government school up to Class VIII.

* All schools are co-educational.

† Primary school in Maharashtra is considered upto the level of Class V whereas in Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh it is till Class IV. Similarly middle level is from Class V to VIII in Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu and Class IV to VII in Maharashtra.

consider daughters' education to be too costly in terms of the loss of labour, especially in families where household work and childcare was seen as the responsibility of young girls.

In the two villages of Madhya Pradesh, Golwa and Digma, there was a total of nine girls and fourteen boys who had dropped out. Though this contradicts the general trend of a greater number of girls dropping out, our findings can be attributed to the unsystematic method that we used in selecting the interviewees. Except for

two of the nine female dropouts (one who was disinterested in her studies and the other who felt mistreated by her classmates) all had dropped out due to domestic compulsions like the birth of a younger sibling, mother's illness, or parental pressure. In Digma

The reasons for boys' discontinuation, more often than not, stemmed from their own preferences or problems.

there were two girls who discontinued because their parents thought that they had studied long enough and should now learn household work. One of them, a Bengali girl, studied up till class six and then dropped out upon attaining puberty. The girl was so unhappy with her parents' decision that she broke into tears during the course of the interview. In her words: "Like the other kids who go to school, I also want to go. I feel bad that my schooling was ended. I was a good and a regular student. I always answered

the questions asked in the class correctly and because of that I got the teacher's appreciation. I want to go back so I can make something of my life and give my village a good name."

All of the nine girl dropouts in Golwa and Digma were engaged in household work. With mothers going out to earn, the girls had to take on responsibility for their younger siblings. According to one such girl: "My mother simply refused to send me to school [because she goes out to work]. I feel sad about not going to school." For another girl in Golwa, minding the newborn baby was the sole reason she had to discontinue her studies. A 13-year-old who dropped out after class three said, "While I was my parents' only child, I was sent to school. But then I had to leave school to care for my two younger sisters and a brother. I regret not being able to study."

All of the boy dropouts, except for one, ended up either earning wages from outside or working in the family enterprise. For parents, the economic incentive to educate their sons was far greater than for daughters since boys were seen as productive assets for the parents.

In families where household work and childcare is considered the responsibility of daughters, parents considered girls education to be too costly in terms of the loss of their labour. It seems only "rational" behaviour on the part of parents in low-income families to allocate the household's scarce resources in favour of male children's education. The paradox, however, is that boys' economic usefulness was not found to be a primary factor leading to their early withdrawal from school. This may have to do with the commonly accepted



Care of younger siblings is often considered girls' responsibility

idea that the higher the level of education that a boy attains, the greater will be the economic returns to the family. The reasons for boys' discontinuation, more often than not, stemmed from their own preferences or problems. There were five boys who abandoned studies due to disinterest, illness, or failure in exams. However, there was one boy from Golwa who had stopped going to school because he didn't have a school uniform. At the time of the study, that particular boy was not engaged in any kind of work.

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Boys, even in poor families, were able to leave school and escape most responsibilities, while the same was simply not possible for the girls.

In the two villages of Maharashtra there was not one girl who dropped out due to a reason specific to her. Almost all the girls were victims of some domestic crisis. For example, a girl from Gharalwadi left school in class seven because her uncle decided that it was now her job to tend their cattle. The girl candidly explained, "I go for cattle tending because my *kaka* (paternal uncle) who used to do it earlier, feels that I have grown old enough to quit studies and take over the job of cattle tending." Such occurrences, even in the relatively more literate village of Gharalwadi show the lower value families place on girls' education. However, sometimes particular circumstances lead to unusual

parental decisions. For instance, in one household in which a girl was compelled to drop out after class seven owing to financial problems at home, her sister was allowed to continue with school at the middle level. On being asked for the reason for such seemingly partial behaviour, the respondent said that her sister, who was disabled by polio, was unlikely to get a husband. She said "I would like her to go school. She needs to study since she is disabled." Her parents wanted their disabled child to become economically independent and felt that continuing her education would increase the likelihood of her getting a job.

In the two villages of Tamil Nadu there were stark differences in the reasons cited by both boys and girls for dropping out. In Kanur village, four out of five of the boys in the sample

discontinued either due to their own disinterest or an inability to cope with their studies. But all the girls who had withdrawn from school did so due to either domestic demands or parental pressure. Of the girls who had dropped out in order to help cope with a domestic crisis, however, very few ended up occupied only with household-related duties. In contrast to the situation in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, in these two Tamil Nadu villages, most of the girl dropouts were also working as paid labour. In all of the villages in the study, there were no instances of boy dropouts doing only unpaid housework.

Girls' Aspirations

The educational aspirations of girls and boys were markedly different.

Most of the girls (20 out of a total of 32) who wished to return to school, did not express specific aspirations. On being asked hypothetically what they would do if they were to be encouraged to resume schooling, a few said that they aspired to become a school teacher or a "madam" in an office. Most of the girls were more pragmatic and could only imagine themselves as "serving their husbands and in-laws", although they did not see this as a superior option to other life choices. As one of them put it: "Anyone can learn and do housework."

In the two villages of Maharashtra, when a girl was allowed to remain in school for a longer period of time, the sole incentive was to improve her chances of getting married to a "better earning urban-based bridegroom". The threshold level of education that was believed to draw such bridegrooms varied. For

All the girls who had withdrawn from school did so due to either domestic demands or parental pressure.

instance, the Muslim women interviewed in Chinchkheda believed in educating girls up to class five. In Gharalwadi, however, according to a girl dropout who left school after class seven, girls should study at least up to the level of matriculation before there would be a positive impact of education in their lives. She thought that an educational level lower than that, irrespective of the exact years of schooling, would only lead to her becoming an ordinary housewife.

Although she left school after class seven, she feels that she is not at any

material disadvantage in comparison to her friends who studied up to class ten. However, having been a bright student, she said: "I want to go back to school. I am interested in studying even beyond the level of class ten. That will enable me to be in a position to do both housework and a job."

Among the boys, those who wished to resume studies (14 out of 30) expected to obtain a job as a result of their education in the police department, an industrial or factory establishment, or in an independent family enterprise. All the boy dropouts who aspired to return to school saw further education solely in terms of a means to get economic advantages.

Indifferent Teachers

In every village studied except for one, parents were disgusted with the performance of the village school teachers. They complained of the fact that teachers' attendance in their own classes was extremely irregular, and when they did bother to show up they were often late to class or spent most of the class time chatting with each other instead of teaching the students. The general consensus among parents was that the teachers were simply undevoted both to their profession and their students. Some of them were engaged in other work that took up a lot of their time, such as running their own farms, in which case teaching became a lower priority.

The only village in which the parents did not express dissatisfaction with the teachers is Golwa, where the parents instead blamed the overall atmosphere in the village as being the cause of their children's low



Girl working in a family-owned shop

achievement in school. They said that the kids never studied, but explained that most of the adults were uneducated and therefore could not provide much help to the children. Furthermore, there was so much work that needed to be done by the entire family to simply make ends meet, there was a tendency for all the villagers to put family and work obligations before studies. In Golwa, although the quality of the curriculum was not observed in depth, we found many of the children in the fifth standard unable to even write their names properly in Hindi, nor did they have much general knowledge about the country when asked questions on basic geography and history. Besides uninterested teachers, illiterate parents, and students overburdened with familial responsibilities, another factor leading to such a low level of general knowledge could be the system of automatic promotion through the fifth standard. Although the structure of schools in some of the states was different, in Madhya Pradesh children were not made to sit for any exams until the sixth standard. Because of this system, even students who had completely failed to grasp the material would automatically move into the next level.

There was also a lot of scope for bias to creep in against students because of the minimal amount of accountability that was demanded of teachers. Up until class ten in most of the villages, students do not sit for public exams, but instead are tested by their teachers who wrote up exams themselves and graded the exams themselves. It was largely left to the individual teacher as to what to test the students on. In a village setting where teachers know each student well, there is nothing to restrain them from letting their personal prejudice come in the way of a child's education if they don't like that particular student.

When a girl was allowed to remain in school for a longer period of time, the sole incentive was to improve her chances of getting married to a "better earning city-based bridegroom".

Inspections of the village schools is basically an empty ritual, with inspectors visiting very rarely. Their main concern was to inspect uniforms and check the students' attendance. Inspections didn't seem to have much of an impact on the quality of the school or the teachers in any of the villages. Given all of these factors, it is little wonder that students' educational aspirations are lower than they should be.

Fighting the Odds

Discussions with school dropouts in these six socio-economically and culturally diverse villages indicated that dropping out of school was heavily

influenced by:

- low parental interest and support for further schooling, especially for girls
- lower educational aspirations among girls as compared to boys
- weak public commitment to the promotion of education
- indifferent teachers killing students' desire to learn

In all the villages in the study, it is believed that the prime objective of education is to improve one's economic opportunities. Parents often explained that they couldn't afford to send their kids to school only for general knowledge or literacy. School had to offer future economic benefits to make it worthwhile, and in light of the fact that relatively higher educated villagers weren't necessarily financially better off, the inherent value of education appears questionable to many.

Since girls in all of the six villages left their parents' house after marriage to live with their in-laws, the economic returns for a girl's natal family if they choose to educate her is low or nil.



Dedicated teachers that stimulate school children's natural curiosity are sorely lacking in government run schools

However, families were aware of other benefits of education to girls and boys alike, such as the ability to travel independently, to read and write letters, and to interact with the larger world. These benefits of primary education were often mentioned by girls in the six villages. In Thervazhi village, for instance, there were responses like, "I will be confident to move on my own and people will not cheat me."

Even among the relatively educated villagers of Tamil Nadu, parents put a lot of pressure on daughters to drop out from school once they attain puberty. Here is where the criticism of low government commitment to education becomes relevant.

The government should provide educational facilities exclusively for girls at convenient locations within the village. The highest level of schooling available within the village most often



determines the maximum level of girls' education. A more gender sensitive

system of public education is therefore called for which takes into account the requirements of rural families, especially the requirements of girls. Otherwise it is unlikely that girls develop high aspirations or parents find education of much use. In rural society, the odds against which girls have to struggle to attain even basic, supposedly compulsory, education, remain much greater than those for boys. □

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Veena Kulkarni is presently a research associate at the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER). This is part of a larger study being conducted by NCAER on the Human Development Profile of Rural India.

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