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REGIONAL DISPARITIES IN WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN INDIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOUTH AND NORTH INDIA

Abstract: This study examines the regional characteristics of women's education in South and North India through a comprehensive analysis of historical, geographical, social, cultural, religious, and political factors. The research explores how colonial policies, post-independence reforms, and regional socio-economic structures have influenced the formation and development of women's education in these two regions. In South India, progressive educational reforms, social movements, and state interventions have contributed to higher literacy rates and greater access to education for women. In contrast, in North India, traditional socio-cultural norms, economic disparities, and gender inequalities have resulted in lower female enrollment and literacy rates. This study employs a comparative analysis to identify the key factors shaping women's educational opportunities across these regions. The findings provide a deeper understanding of regional disparities in women's education in India and offer a scientific foundation for developing effective educational policies aimed at promoting gender equality.

Keywords: women's education, South India, North India, regional characteristics, historical analysis, socio-cultural factors, educational policy, gender equality.

Introduction. Women's education in India plays a crucial role in the country's socio-economic development and the promotion of gender equality. However, significant regional disparities exist between northern and southern India regarding women's access to education. These disparities are shaped by historical, geographical, social, cultural, religious, and political factors, which have influenced educational opportunities, the development of educational institutions, and gender-based attitudes toward education in different regions.

The education system in southern India has historically been more developed, particularly due to reforms and social movements implemented during and after the colonial period. Higher literacy rates among women, active participation of social organizations, and government-led initiatives have contributed to significant advancements in gender equality in this region. In contrast, northern India has experienced long-standing restrictions on women's access to education due to patriarchal social structures, traditional gender norms, and religious and social constraints.

This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the development of women's education in northern and southern India, considering historical, social, cultural, and political factors. The findings of this research will provide scientifically grounded recommendations for reducing gender disparities, improving interregional education policies, and expanding educational opportunities for women. Furthermore, the study contributes both theoretically and practically to the examination of India's educational system's regional characteristics and the formulation of strategic policies aimed at achieving gender equality in education.

Methodology. This study aims to analyze the regional characteristics of women's education in India based on historical, social, cultural, religious, and political factors. The research employs

historical comparison, comparative analysis, gender studies, and sociological approaches as its primary methodological foundations.

Comparative Analysis of the Regional Characteristics of Women's Education in Northern and Southern India. The history of women's education in India is complex and regionally diverse, with significant differences between Northern and Southern India. These differences are linked to geographical, social, cultural, and religious factors that have developed throughout historical processes.

In Northern India, the development of women's education has been limited for centuries due to various cultural and religious influences. The patriarchal system and social stratification have significantly reduced women's access to education. After the Vedic period, a patriarchal social system became firmly established, with religious texts like Manusmriti restricting women's social roles mainly to family life, stating that a girl is under the care of her father when born, her husband when married, and her son if widowed [1].

Under the rule of Muslim dynasties and the influence of Brahmanical traditions, women in Northern India were primarily engaged in household duties and traditional gender roles. As a result, their access to education was severely restricted. Even during British colonial rule, priority was initially given to male education, and only by the late 19th century did women start gaining educational opportunities.

After India's independence, the government implemented various reforms to promote women's education in northern regions. However, deep-rooted gender disparities and economic poverty have kept female literacy levels lower compared to Southern India. The percentage of girls attending school and enrolling in higher education remains significantly lower due to ongoing social and cultural restrictions.

In Southern India, historically, women had relatively better access to education. This was influenced by the Dravidian culture and the relatively progressive views of Buddhism and Jainism regarding gender equality. Due to these religious and cultural influences, women had the right to receive both religious and secular education.

Even in the medieval period, Southern India remained relatively autonomous, allowing women to access some level of education. During the colonial era, Protestant missionaries and social reform movements played a crucial role in advancing women's education [2]. In particular, during the 19th and 20th centuries, reformers like Periyar E. V. Ramasamy promoted gender equality, significantly expanding educational opportunities for women [3].

After India gained independence, in the Southern region, both central and local governments introduced special scholarships, free education programs, and transportation facilities to support girls' education. As a result, women's access to higher education improved significantly.

Thus, the development of women's education in Northern and Southern India is shaped by distinct regional characteristics. These differences have evolved through long historical processes and continue to have a significant impact on the current state of women's education. The following section will compare the regional characteristics of women's education in these two regions.

Natural-Geographical Factors. The natural and geographical conditions of India directly influence the development of women's education, creating significant disparities between the Northern and Southern regions. Factors such as geographical location, climate, and the level of infrastructure development are crucial in determining educational opportunities and also affect gender equality.

Northern India experiences extreme climatic variations, with cold winters and intensely hot summers. Particularly in certain areas of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, the presence of deserts and river

systems poses challenges for infrastructure development, limiting access to educational institutions in rural areas and negatively impacting gender equality.

Additionally, in regions near the foothills of the Himalayas and villages close to the Thar Desert, educational infrastructure remains underdeveloped. Due to the long distances required to reach schools, many families refrain from sending their daughters to school. In these areas, a lack of transportation facilities further restricts girls' access to education.

Although various government initiatives have been implemented to improve educational infrastructure in rural areas since independence, issues such as school shortages and weak infrastructure remain pressing concerns in certain parts of Northern India.

Conversely, Southern India has a more moderate climate and geographically favorable conditions. This region features coastal areas, tropical forests, and mountainous terrain, where the growth of agriculture and tourism has facilitated greater investment in the education sector.

Southern India also has a higher level of urbanization and well-developed infrastructure, including transportation networks. For instance, in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, education quality and literacy rates are significantly higher, with increased investment in education, improvements in the number and quality of public schools, and a greater focus on women's literacy. The well-developed road and transport system in Southern India had facilitated girls' access to schools, leading to higher enrollment rates [4].

Kerala, in particular, has the highest women's education rates in India, where the positive influence of natural-geographical conditions plays a crucial role [5]. The state's historical openness due to maritime trade and international interactions has expanded educational opportunities for women.

Regarding the socio-economic impact of natural-geographical factors, scholars such as Jeffrey Sachs and Jared Diamond have analyzed the role of geography in the development of civilizations [6,7]. Jeffrey Sachs' research on economic development and infrastructure challenges highlights how access to natural resources and transportation networks directly influences gender equality and educational opportunities. Meanwhile, Jared Diamond explains how geographical factors have shaped the development of civilizations, analyzing the ways in which climate and natural conditions impact a society's economic and cultural progress.

Furthermore, Amartya Sen, in his work "Development as Freedom", emphasizes the crucial role of women's education in economic development and gender equality [8]. In the case of India, these differences are clearly reflected in the disparities between educational opportunities in the Northern and Southern regions.

Natural and geographical factors significantly influence the development of women's education in India. The harsh climatic conditions of Northern India, underdeveloped infrastructure, and weak transportation networks make it difficult for girls to attend school, thereby perpetuating gender disparities.

On the contrary, the relatively favorable natural and geographical conditions, higher level of urbanization, and well-developed infrastructure in Southern India provide greater opportunities for the advancement of women's education. In particular, in the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, government-led reforms, along with well-developed transport and educational infrastructure, have significantly contributed to achieving a high level of gender equality.

This analysis demonstrates that natural and geographical factors have varying impacts on gender equality and educational opportunities across different regions of India. Therefore, in order to improve women's education in Northern India, it is crucial to enhance infrastructure, expand transport facilities, and increase the number of educational institutions in rural areas.

Cultural and Social Factors. Cultural and social factors significantly influence women's education in Northern and Southern India, with notable regional variations. In Northern Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Haryana, a traditionally patriarchal society prioritizes male children, often limiting educational opportunities for girls [9]. Early marriage remains a deeply rooted practice, particularly in Rajasthan and Bihar, restricting female access to education [10]. While some families permit their daughters to receive primary education, they frequently discourage them from pursuing higher education.

Conversely, in Southern India, gender equality is more embedded in societal norms, and female education is widely supported. Kerala, for instance, historically had a matriarchal system before colonial rule, which contributed to the promotion of women's education [11]. Higher education enrollment rates are significantly higher in South India, particularly in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where the proportion of female university students exceeds that of many other regions.

The caste system has also historically shaped women's socio-political participation. As noted by M.K. Kudryatsev, education was traditionally reserved for upper-caste individuals, while lower-caste groups were relegated to agricultural and service-sector occupations [12]. However, the Dravidian movement in South India challenged the caste hierarchy, leading to greater educational access. In contrast, caste-based social stratification remains more pronounced in Northern India.

Differences in lifestyle further contribute to regional disparities in women's education. According to researcher Aadhya Mokshangna Cameron, Northern Indians tend to engage in conspicuous consumption, whereas Southern Indians generally adopt a more frugal and pragmatic approach to financial management. While Northern Indians often invest in luxury items such as automobiles, housing, and clothing, Southern Indians prioritize savings and allocate resources toward essential sectors, including education.

A major cultural barrier to women's education in Northern India is the practice of purdah (female seclusion), which restricts women's participation in public and professional life. Over time, the concept of purdah has evolved beyond its original meaning, encompassing broader societal constraints that reinforce women's subordination. This system dictates that women should devote themselves entirely to family responsibilities, with education and professional aspirations often deemed inappropriate. These entrenched patriarchal norms have led to severe social sanctions against women who challenge them. In states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Haryana, women frequently encounter gender-based violence, including sexual assault, acid attacks, abduction, and honor killings.

The persistence of such social restrictions has reinforced gender segregation in education and public life. In the 1970s, rural parents in Delhi feared that higher education could diminish their daughters' marital prospects [13]. In certain rural areas of Haryana, women who do not adhere to veiling practices are subjected to social stigma and are perceived as bringing dishonor to their families [14].

Religious Factor. Another significant factor influencing women's education is religion, which has varying impacts in different regions of India. In Northern India, religious influence on education has traditionally been more conservative, often restricting girls' access to education. In contrast, Southern India adopts a more liberal approach, providing greater educational freedom for women.

A similar duality exists within the Muslim community. According to the 2011 Census of India, the literacy rate among women in Jammu and Kashmir (where 68% of the population is Muslim) was 56.43%, whereas in Lakshadweep, a southern region with a 97% Muslim population, female literacy stood at 91.80% [15]. This contrast highlights the regional differences in religious influence on education.

In Northern India, religion sometimes acts as a barrier to women's education, whereas in the South, religious values are more supportive of female education.

Economic Factor. Economic factors play a crucial role in all sectors, including education. In both Northern and Southern India, economic conditions significantly influence women's access to education. In Northern India, economic inequality and poverty are among the primary barriers preventing girls from receiving an education. Families from impoverished backgrounds often prioritize investing in the education of male children while keeping daughters confined to domestic responsibilities. Additionally, the limited employment opportunities for women in Northern India contribute to the perception that education has low economic returns for girls.

In contrast, Southern India, particularly states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, has experienced greater economic prosperity and a stronger emphasis on gender equality, which has expanded educational opportunities for girls. Women's workforce participation is notably higher, reinforcing the direct link between education and future employment prospects. Furthermore, the availability of scholarships, free education programs, and improved transportation facilities has significantly contributed to advancements in female education in the South [16].

Southern India hosts major economic hubs such as Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, and Mumbai, which are key centers for investment and economic growth. The region is often considered the most significant economic zone in India due to the presence of a highly skilled workforce prepared to enter the labor market. In contrast, Northern India has a strong tradition of artisanal industries, with Kashmiri communities specializing in traditional embroidery and Punjab being known for its emphasis on physical labor. Meanwhile, Southern India has emerged as a leader in knowledge-based industries, with a workforce predominantly engaged in intellectual professions.

Political Factor. The policies of the central government in India differ in their focus across regions. In Northern India, government policies are primarily aimed at overcoming social barriers to education, while in Southern India, greater emphasis is placed on higher education and employment generation. Although educational programs exist in Northern India, gender disparities limit their effectiveness. In contrast, in Southern India, both the central and local governments view women's education as a key factor in regional development, leading to additional investments and proactive measures to enhance educational opportunities for girls.

The Indian government has introduced several scholarship programs to promote girls' education across all regions, such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, and Ammaiyar Scholarship [17]. These programs have been particularly effective in Southern India, helping girls continue their education. Unfortunately, despite similar financial aid initiatives in Northern India, early marriage prevents many girls from benefiting from these opportunities.

Furthermore, researchers Abhijit Banerjee and Lakshmi Iyer have highlighted land ownership patterns as another factor contributing to disparities in women's empowerment between the northern and southern regions [18]. During British colonial rule, administrative and judicial control was handed over to landlords (zamindars) in the North, whereas in the South, local governance structures were more community-driven. As a result, southern regions saw greater investment in schools, healthcare centers, and infrastructure development, fostering better educational outcomes.

Conclusion.

The development of women's education in India is deeply influenced by regional characteristics. In Northern India, traditional barriers continue to hinder progress toward gender equality, making it challenging to bridge educational gaps. In contrast, Southern India has made

significant strides in empowering women through education, emerging as a model for successful educational policies. To ensure gender parity and further improve women's education nationwide, it is essential to implement comprehensive reforms in Northern India while leveraging the successful strategies of Southern India as a blueprint for future development.

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