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GENDER DISPARITIES IN LITERACY AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AMONG TURI CASTE OF JALPAIGURI DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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Abstract

This study explores gender gaps in literacy rate, educational attainment and school participation among Turi caste in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. The study is based on primary data collected through a household survey of 109 Turi households. The study highlights the caste disadvantage and gender inequality that shape unequal educational attainment among Turi girls. The results have revealed a pronounced gender disparity in literacy rates and educational attainment particularly at a higher level of education. The Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) at the elementary level of education remains considerably low, averaging at 68.60 per cent, with the widest gaps in Nagrakata and Matiali blocks. The study reveals that financial constraints, uneven household duties, indifferent attitude of the parents towards girls' education are largely restricting girls' opportunities for education. The study concludes that caste and gender disadvantages reinforce each other to check the attainment of education among Turi caste of Jalpaiguri district. Thus, there is a need for financial support, community-level awareness efforts and gender-sensitive measures that address the specific educational barriers faced by Turi girls

Keywords: Gender Disparities, Educational Attainment, Scheduled Castes, Turi Caste, Jalpaiguri district.

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a cornerstone of human capabilities. It plays a major role in promoting inclusive growth and expanding opportunities for social mobility and the reduction of structural inequality. Yet even after decades of constitutional safeguards and affirmative action, Scheduled Castes (SCs) continue to face persistent barriers to quality education (Deshpande, 2006). Structural barriers such as caste-based exclusion, poor school facilities and economic insecurity still restrict literacy growth and educational progression (Thorat and Khan, 2023). These

challenges are more visible in socially and geographically marginal areas where poverty, weak institutions and limited livelihood options continue to restrict educational opportunities.

In West Bengal, inequality in education among SCs remains a matter of concern. Although the state has achieved near-universal primary enrolment and a steady rise in literacy and education, yet the benefits do not reach to all communities equally (Majhi and Sardar, 2019). A critical intra-caste analysis of literacy rate, education and employment in prestigious jobs among the SCs indicates that socio-economically weaker castes, such as Turi,

Bagdi, Lohar, Dom remain highly disadvantaged. It is due to their limited capacity to access and effectively utilize welfare and educational schemes from generations. This disadvantage is more evident among females within these highly marginalized castes, where entrenched gender norms and persistent structural barriers continue to constrain educational advancement among the girls (Majhi and Sardar, 2019; Sarkar and Kasemi, 2020).

The capability approach proposed by Amartya Sen (1999) and later expanded by Nussbaum (2000) offers a valuable framework to understand caste and gender-based inequalities among marginalized communities in access to literacy and education. Similarly, Kabeer (2005) has highlighted how gendered responsibilities and unequal access to resources affect educational decisions within the poor households. Jodhka's (2017) study also offers valuable insights into the caste and rural inequalities which further demonstrate how entrenched social hierarchies continue to shape access to key institutions, including schools.

Although the SCs have witnessed a notable enhancement in enrolment, yet gains in learning outcomes, retention and transition to higher levels of education remain uneven (Khan, 2018). Against this backdrop, the present study examines how caste and socio-economic status and gender norms together shape literacy, educational attainment and school participation among the Turi caste in Jalpaiguri district.

Objectives of Study

Major objectives of the study are:

- to examine gender disparities in literacy rates and educational attainment among the Turi caste and

- to analyze the NER and the male-female differential in NER at the elementary level of education among the Turi caste in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal.

Study Area

Jalpaiguri district is located in the northern part of West Bengal, India. Geographically, the district lies between 26°15'47" N to 26°59'34" N latitudes and 88°23'2" E to 89°7'30" E longitudes (Fig. 1). Jalpaiguri is renowned for its tea gardens, timber, and tobacco. The district is demographically diverse with a considerable SC population (46.46 per cent; excluding the newly bifurcated Alipurduar district), in which Turi is a numerically minor scheduled caste. The 2011 census, has recorded 2924 Turi individuals, including 1421 males and 1503 females in the district. They make up only 0.20 per cent of the total SC population in Jalpaiguri district. This indicates their extremely small demographic presence in the district. The district is divided into seven community development (C.D.) blocks. For this study, four blocks namely Dhupguri, Mal, Matiali and Nagrakata have been selected. The selection of these blocks has been based on the concentration of Turi population as identified after consulting the Backward Classes Welfare Department (BCWD) of West Bengal.

The Turi Caste

The Turi community is found across several states in India, including Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal. They have a notable concentration in West Bengal (Peterson et al. 2024). The Turi caste is officially recognized as scheduled caste in West Bengal as per, Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal, 2025. They are

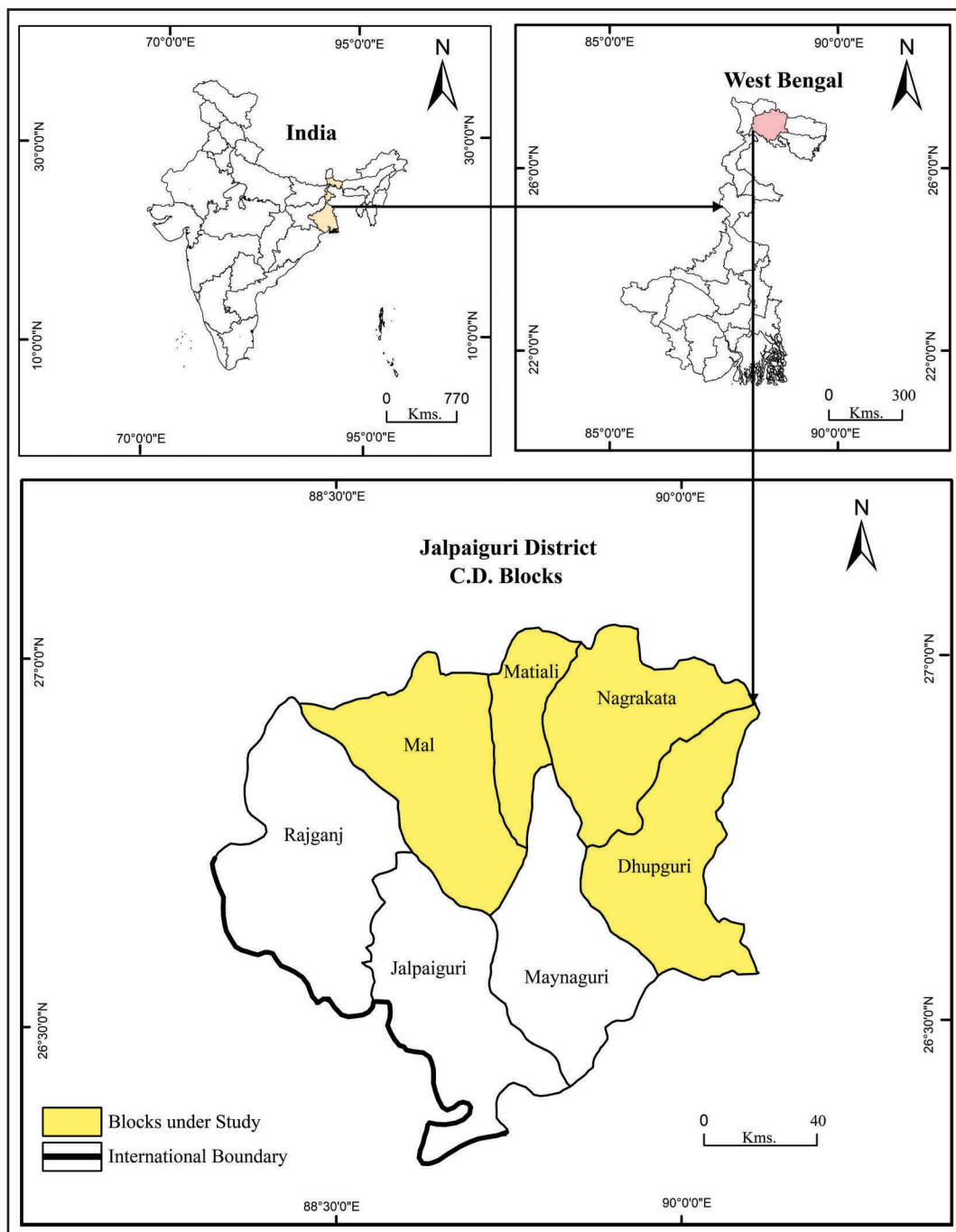


Fig. 1

traditionally engaged in bamboo craftsmanship making household items such as baskets (*tokri*), winnowing sieves (*sup*), mats and hats. However, the introduction of quite cheap plastic alternatives and industrial goods has significantly reduced the demand for their craft. This often makes them to shift to labour and other activities in the informal sector of the economy to supplement their income. In West Bengal, they are largely concentrated in districts such as Birbhum, Purba Bardhaman and Maldah. However, a section of Turi population is also present in the northern districts of West Bengal, such as Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar. Linguistically, they have largely shifted from their Austroasiatic Turi language to Bengali or Mundari. This reflects both socio-economic assimilation and the erosion of linguistic heritage. Economic hardship and low levels of education add to these constraints. Together, these factors widen the gender gap in literacy and learning. Educationally, they continue to face structural, economic and other associated barriers resulting in limited access to quality schooling. Socially, the Turi cast faces caste-based discrimination. Gender norms in the community are shaped by a patriarchal structure. Property and decision-making remain largely under the control of males.

Database and Methodology

The study is based on secondary as well as primary sources of data. The secondary data pertaining to total population, literacy levels and educational attainment of Turi caste have been obtained from the Special Tables for individual scheduled caste population, Census of India, 2011. Further, the secondary data have been supplemented by primary data, forming the core of this study. Primary data have been collected through an extensive household

survey conducted during 2021 in the selected community development blocks within the study area. The blocks for the survey have been identified in consultation with the government officials from the SC/ST cell of Jalpaiguri district based on the high concentration of Turi population in the district. However, due to highly dispersed settlement pattern of the community, it has not been feasible to delineate specific villages and construct a comprehensive sampling frame for probability-based random sampling. To address this challenge, a snowball sampling technique has been employed. Turi households in the blocks have been identified through consultations with officials of the SC/ST cells of the Block Development Offices. With the consent of these officials, hardcopy of scheduled caste certificates submitted by various SC individuals have been checked to identify Turi households. Using this information, the identified Turi households have been approached to have their consent to participate in the survey. This group formed the initial set of respondents for the snowball sampling procedure. Thereafter, each participating household has been requested to give the location of other Turi households within their social networks, which facilitated the subsequent stages of the snowball sampling process. In total, 182 Turi households have been identified across the four study blocks. These comprised 24 households in Dhupguri, 37 in Mal, 46 in Matiali and 75 in Nagrakata blocks. This process enabled the construction of a working sampling frame. From this frame, 60 per cent of the households have been selected, yielding a final sample of 109 households distributed across the blocks. The head of each sampled household has been interviewed to obtain information on the literacy levels and educational attainment of

household members. In the absence of the head, the next most senior adult member of the family has been interviewed to collect the required information.

Household survey has been followed by personal interviews to supplement and contextualize the findings of the survey. A total of 56 semi-structured interviews have been conducted to learn the underlying cause of low female literacy, limited educational attainment and low female enrolment in elementary schools within the Turi caste as identified during the household survey. The respondents comprised key stakeholders, including government officials such as Block Development Officers, Inspectors from the Backward Class Welfare Department at the selected blocks, teachers from the government primary and higher secondary schools, *Gram Panchayat Pradhans* (heads of local self-government in rural areas) and respected community elders aged 35 years and above. Interview data have been coded manually. Themes such as financial constraints, domestic responsibilities, indifferent attitude of the parent have been identified through repeated reading and comparison of the transcripts. Basic triangulation has been ensured by systematically comparing qualitative themes from the interviews with quantitative patterns observed in the household survey to verify and contextualize the findings.

The study applies the following indices and measures to examine gender-based educational disparities among Turi community:

Gender Disparity Index in Literacy

The Gender Disparity Index (GDI) in literacy indicates the extent to which one gender lags behind the other in achievement of different levels of literacy. Gender disparity

index devised by Sopher (1974) and further modified by Kundu and Rao (1986) has been used to quantify male-female disparities in literacy rates. The index has been employed as under:

$$GDI = \left[\left(\frac{\log X_2}{X_1} \right) + \left\{ \frac{\log(200 - X_1)}{200 - X_2} \right\} \right]$$

Here, GDI denotes the gender disparity index, X_1 represents the literacy rate of the deprived group (females), and X_2 represents the literacy rate of the dominant group (males). GDI value of 0 indicates perfect equality between the two groups. Conversely, higher GDI values reflect a greater degree of inequality, while lower values indicate lesser disparity.

Gender Disparity Index in Education

The Gender Disparity Index (GDI) in educational attainment indicates the extent to which one gender lags behind the other in achievement of different levels of education. To measure gender disparity across different levels of educational attainment based on primary data collected from the field, the GDI devised by Chakraborty (1999) has been applied. The index has been calculated by using the following formula:

$$GDI = \left(\frac{Y_p \times X}{Y \times X_p} \right)$$

Here, GDI denotes gender disparity index, X represents the total male population aged 7 years and above, and X_p denotes the male population at a specific level of education. Similarly, Y is the total female population aged 7 years and above, and Y_p refers to the female population at the corresponding level of education. In this study, the GDI has been calculated separately for the primary, middle, and secondary and above levels of education.

Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) in Elementary Education

The NER has been defined as the proportion of children aged 6-14 years who are enrolled in elementary schools relative to the total population of children in the same age group, expressed as a percentage. The NER have been calculated separately for male and female children among the Turi caste based on primary data collected through a household survey in selected villages. The NER has been calculated by using the following formula:

$$NER = \frac{\text{Number of children enrolled in elementary school}}{\text{Total population of children aged 6 to 14 years}} \times 100$$

Results and Discussion

Levels of Literacy among Households of Turi Caste

There are considerable inter-block variations in the literacy rate of Turi caste in Jalpaiguri district. The overall district average remains relatively low at 50.30 per cent (Table 1). Among the blocks under study, Dhupguri block has registered the highest literacy rate of 57.69 per cent. This comparatively high rate of literacy is attributed to relatively better socio-economic conditions, improved access to educational institutions and relatively higher community awareness regarding the value of formal education. Similarly, Mal block has registered a literacy rate of 51.76 per cent, marginally exceeding the district average. In contrast, Matiali (48.57 per cent) and Nagrakata (46.51 per cent) blocks have recorded low rates of literacy than the district average, indicating lower educational opportunities and limited household capacity to support schooling. Insights from the personal interviews have revealed that these two blocks have relatively poorer economic conditions. Households are mostly dependent

upon casual and seasonal labour. Thus, the livelihood arrangements increase the demand for children to work which reduces the time available for study. Girls are often more affected as domestic responsibilities fall disproportionately higher on them. A 52-year-old mother from Matiali block reported that her daughter “hardly gets time to sit with her books,” as she has to spend time in cooking and caring for younger siblings, because adults work long hour in the tea gardens to support the family.

Thus, the inter-block variations in literacy rate reflect the impact of local economic pressures and gender norms on the literacy rate of Turi community. This pattern is consistent with wider research on rural labour and scheduled caste education in India. Thorat and Sabharwal (2010) have noted that irregular and low-paid work often limits the study time available to children in SC households as observed among the Turis caste. Similarly, Drèze and Sen (2013) have highlighted how poverty, labour insecurity and gender norms reinforce educational exclusion among marginalized groups.

Gender Disparity in Literacy Rate among Households of Turi Caste

The analysis of the Gender Disparity Index (GDI) in literacy among the Turi caste in Jalpaiguri district reveals a noticeable disparity. Females lag behind their male counterparts by 0.17 points in literacy acquisition (Table 1). The extent of this disparity, however, varies considerably across the blocks. Nagrakata block has registered the highest disparity index of 0.24 points, indicating the sharpest disadvantage for girls. Interview findings provide further insight as 42.85 per cent of respondents have reported financial constraints as the major barrier to

Table 1
Jalpaiguri District: Literacy Rate and Gender Disparity Index in Literacy among the Turi Caste (2021)

C.D. Block	Literacy Rate (per cent)	Gender Disparity Index
Dhupguri	57.69	0.12
Mal	51.76	0.19
Matiali	48.57	0.22
Nagrakata	46.51	0.24
District Average	50.30	0.17

Source: Compiled by Authors.

girls' education. It is followed by lack of social awareness and indifferent attitude of the parents (21.43 per cent) and inadequate infrastructural facilities (7.14 per cent), respectively (Table 2). These quantitative and qualitative patterns, together point to a deeper intersection of economic vulnerability, household roles and weak institutional support resulting higher gender disparity in rate of literacy. The effects of these pressures have also been noted in the accounts shared by local school teachers in Nagrakata block. During the interview, a teacher mentioned that many girls experience irregular attendance even at the primary level due to domestic responsibilities such as cooking and caring for younger siblings. As a result, low engagement with reading and writing limits the consolidation of basic literacy skills among many girls. This results in lower levels of female literacy in the block.

Nagrakata block is followed by Matiali block with a disparity index of 0.22 points (Table 1). Financial constraints (35.71 per cent), indifferent parental attitudes (21.43 per cent), lack of social awareness (14.29), engagements in economic activities (14.28) and fear of harassment by boys (7.14 per cent) have limited the enrolment of girls in the schools (Table 2). Similarly, Mal block, with a disparity index of 0.19 points, also exceeds the

district average (0.17). Insights from personal interviews have indicated that routine household responsibilities and the need to supplement household income continue to hinder the attainment of female literacy in this block.

On the other hand, Dhupguri block has recorded the lowest disparity index of 0.12 points (Table 1). This indicates comparatively greater parity in literacy acquisition between males and females. It is worth noting that comparatively low 28.57 percentage of the respondents have cited financial constraints as major deterrents for female literacy, indicating comparatively lower dependence on girls for casual labour in this block (Table 2). As a result, relatively better female literacy rate has been observed in this block. However, indifferent attitude of the parents (28.57 per cent) towards girls' education and limited social awareness (21.42 per cent) still remains a major bottleneck for attainment of literacy for some households (Table 2).

Overall, the block-level variations show that the literacy rates among Turi girls have been shaped by other factors than household resources. It is due to the combined effects of gender norms, labour responsibilities and the local socio-economic conditions. Blocks relying more on casual and seasonal work such as Nagrakata and Matiali, have

Table 2
Jalpaiguri District: Opinions of Respondents for Poor Female Literacy Rate among the Turi Caste (2021)

Opinions	C.D. Block				
	Dhupguri	Mal	Matiali	Nagrakata	District Average
	Percentage of Respondents				
Financial Constraints	28.57	35.71	35.71	42.85	35.71
Indifferent Attitude of Parents	28.57	28.57	21.43	21.43	25.00
Engagement in Economic Activities	7.14	14.29	14.28	7.14	10.71
Siblings Care and other Domestic Activities	14.29	7.14	7.14	0.00	7.14
Inadequate Infrastructural Facilities	0.00	0.00	0.00	7.14	1.79
Fear of Harassment by Boys	0.00	0.00	7.14	0.00	1.79
Lack of Social Awareness	21.42	14.29	14.29	21.43	17.86
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Compiled by Authors.

shown the widest disparities. This aligns with earlier studies documenting the constraints of poverty and patriarchal norms on restricting SC girls' literacy and education in rural areas (Thorat and Sabharwal 2010). The relatively lower disparity in Dhupguri Block is in alignment with Desai and Kulkarni's (2008) observation that improved educational access reduces the gender gap in literacy.

Gender Disparity in Educational Attainment among Households of Turi Caste

The study reveals that at primary level, Nagrakata block has recorded the lowest GDI of 0.51, indicating the widest gender gap in this level of educational attainment (Table 3). This block is followed by Matiali block (0.55), reflecting limited female participation at the foundational stage of education. In contrast, Mal (0.68) and Dhupguri (0.72) blocks have surpassed the district average (0.60) of GDI, suggesting relatively better parity in education between males and females at the primary stage of education.

Disparity widens sharply at the middle level of education. Matiali block has reported the lowest GDI (0.37), underscoring the severe disadvantage faced by girls towards educational attainment at this stage of education (Table 3). Nagrakata block (0.52) has also indicated a continuing gender gap, whereas Mal (0.75) and Dhupguri (0.72) blocks have reported comparatively better position of girls in educational attainment. At the secondary and above level of education, Nagrakata block has recorded the lowest GDI of 0.39 points which is also below the district average (0.50). This highlights a deep-seated constraint on girls' access to higher education in this block. The respondents during the interview have reported that as girls grow older in age, their domestic responsibilities increase considerably. This reduces their study time and regular attendance in schools. Elder girls are often engaged in casual labour during peak agricultural and tea-garden seasons. This makes it difficult for them to continue beyond the primary level of education.

Table 3
Jalpaiguri District: Gender Disparity Index at Different Levels of Educational Attainment
among the Turi Caste (2021)

C.D. Block	Gender Disparity Index (GDI)		
	Primary	Middle	Secondary and above
Dhupguri	0.72	0.72	0.54
Mal	0.68	0.75	0.56
Matiali	0.55	0.37	0.55
Nagrakata	0.51	0.52	0.39
District Average	0.60	0.57	0.50

Source: Compiled by Authors.

Overall, gender disparity in education among Turi caste follows a cumulative pattern. However, the gender disparity in education increases as one moves away from primary to middle and secondary and above level of education, particularly taking into account district level trends in GDI. This also reflects national trends showing widening gender disparities among SCs at secondary levels due to social and economic constraints (Halim et al., 2016; Prabhakar, 2022).

Net Enrolment Ratio in Elementary Education among Households of Turi Caste

The NER is an important measure of assessing the enrolment in elementary education. It is especially useful for identifying gender disparities in school participation. Among Turi caste of Jalpaiguri district, the overall NER stands at 68.60 per cent (Table 4). Male enrolment has been higher at 74.31 per cent, while female enrolment remains at 62.24 per cent, reflecting a gender gap of 12.07 percentage points. However, block level analysis reveals a notable variation in enrolment.

Dhupguri block has recorded the highest NER at 80.00 per cent (Table 4). Female enrolment stands at 75.00 per cent,

with a moderate gender gap of 9.62 percentage points. Mal block follows Dhupguri block with an NER of 71.05 per cent and a gender gap of 8.33 percentage points (Table 4). Insights from personal interviews show that although financial constraints remain a concern in Dhupguri (37.50 per cent) and Mal block (41.07 per cent), yet comparatively lower burden of domestic responsibilities and better social awareness have increased the enrolment of the girls in schools (Table 5). Matiali block succeeded Mal block by recording a NER of 69.81 per cent which marginally exceeds the district average (68.60 per cent). Female NER stands at 64.00 per cent, with a comparatively wider gender gap of 11.00 percentage points. Financial constraints (39.29 per cent), girls' involvement in economic activities (12.50 per cent) and weak social awareness (8.93 per cent) have emerged as major factors limiting the girls' enrolment in schools (Table 5).

Nagrakata block has recorded the lowest overall NER at 63.74 per cent. Female enrolment stands at 55.81 per cent, exhibiting the widest gender gap of 15.02 percentage points, which is the highest among the four blocks under study (Table 4). Female enrolment is low because of financial constraints (44.64 per cent), greater involvement in

Table 4

Jalpaiguri District: Net Enrolment Ratio in Elementary Education among the Turi Caste (2021)

C.D. Block	Net Enrolment Ratio			
	Total	Male	Female	Difference
	Percentage			
Dhupguri	80.00	84.62	75.00	9.62
Mal	71.05	75.00	66.67	8.33
Matiali	69.81	75.00	64.00	11.00
Nagrakata	63.74	70.83	55.81	15.02
District Average	68.60	74.31	62.24	12.07

Source: Compiled by Authors.

economic (14.29 per cent) and domestic activities (8.93 per cent), along with inadequate infrastructure (3.57 per cent) and fear of harassment by boys (1.79 per cent; Table 5). These factors collectively underscore how poverty, household responsibilities, and social insecurity reinforce and perpetuate the pronounced gender disparity in education within the block.

The persistent gap between male and

female in NER has also been found among other marginalized scheduled caste groups across the country. Research on the Musahar community of Bihar shows that intense poverty, parental apathy and unequal household labour place girls at a disadvantage position (Sahay, 2019). Similarly, a study on the Madiga community of Andhra Pradesh points towards social exclusion and caste-based discrimination as continuing barriers for

Table 5

Jalpaiguri District: Opinions of Respondents for Low Female Net Enrolment Ratio in Elementary Education among the Turi Caste (2021)

Opinions	C.D. Block				
	Dhupguri	Mal	Matiali	Nagrakata	District Average
	Percentage of Respondents				
Financial Constraints	37.50	41.07	39.29	44.64	40.63
Indifferent Attitude of the Parents	25.00	21.43	17.86	12.50	19.20
Engagement in Economic Activities	10.71	7.14	12.50	14.29	11.16
Low Maternal Education	12.50	16.07	8.93	10.71	12.05
Siblings Care and other Domestic Activities	7.14	8.93	7.14	8.93	8.04
Lack of Social Awareness	7.14	5.36	8.93	3.57	6.25
Children are not Interested in Schooling	0.00	0.00	1.79	0.00	0.45
Fear of Harassment by Boys	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.79	0.45
Inadequate Infrastructural Facilities	0.00	0.00	3.57	3.57	1.79
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Compiled by Authors.

girls' education (Sengupta, 2008). Collectively, these studies reveal a structural pattern of gendered educational marginalization among the scheduled castes. Thus, the gender disparity in elementary education among Turi caste has been shaped not only by access but also by continuity, regularity and opportunity for education. Economic hardship, household responsibilities and limited institutional support also reduce girls' enrolment in schools.

Conclusions

This study has examined the structural and gender-specific barriers that shape the literacy and educational attainment among Turi caste in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. The findings have shown that the literacy rate among the Turi caste remains low. The study reveals noticeable gender disparity in rate of literacy across all the blocks under study. Dhupguri block has witnessed relatively higher literacy rate and a smaller gender disparity. In contrast, Nagrakata block has recorded the lowest literacy rate and the widest gender gap in literacy. These differences reveal sharp inter-block variations shaped by local structural barriers such as intense financial constraints, gendered domestic labour demands, dependence on casual and seasonal labour.

The analysis of GDI across different levels of education reveals a cumulative pattern. Disparity is relatively modest at the primary level but widens substantially at the middle and secondary and above levels of education. This suggests that although access to educational institution has improved, yet retention and progression of Turi girls in schools remained inadequate. The NER has been low, as female enrolment consistently remained lower than that of males across all the blocks. However, Nagrakata block has

recorded the widest gender gap in NER.

Qualitative insights from personal interviews reveal several interconnected constraints limiting the enrolment of the girls in schools. Financial hardship, indifferent attitude of the parents and domestic responsibilities largely restrict girls' enrolment in schools. Low maternal literacy, lack of social awareness and fear of harassment by boys also leads to early withdrawal of girls, especially at a higher level of education. Inter-block analysis has shown a relatively better condition in Dhupguri and Mal blocks, while Nagrakata and Matiali blocks remain at the most disadvantaged position. This indicates about uneven and localized character for girls' educational exclusion across blocks. Thus, policy interventions are required to address the caste and gender-based constraints that are shaping educational exclusion among Turi girls. Targeted measures like financial support and community sensitization are essential, particularly for improving girls' retention and continuity at the middle and secondary levels of education.

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