



Status of Women's Education and Gender Disparity in Literacy in North Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

The most effective tool for attaining success is education. A nation's capacity to develop greatly depends on its literacy rate. However, both genders should have equal access to education, especially women. A well-educated woman strives to improve society as a whole and the quality, size, and output of the labour force. Unfortunately, basic facilities like education are denied in some countries, like India. Discrimination is prevalent among the genders in literacy which adversely affects the whole society and the economy. This research paper aims to investigate the status of the female literacy rate, the decadal growth rate of female literacy, and gender disparity in literacy in North Bengal by examining the district-level data.

KEYWORDS: Education, female literacy rate, decadal growth rate, gender disparity in literacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this modern era, education is arguably among the most powerful weapons to achieve success for every individual. The development of a country is greatly reliant on its literate population. Education facilitates information, skills, and abilities, and contributes to the development of positive attitudes. It also changes the mind, thought, outlook, and personality, leading to enlightenment. Consequently, after clothing, food, and shelter, education is regarded as one of the necessities (Vasantha, 2017). It is one of the most important factors responsible for the development of a person, a social group, or a community, especially the standing of women in society. "Women's education" refers to every area of education that attempts to increase females' knowledge, competence, thought, and skills. Women's education encompasses all forms, resulting in holistic development that improves women's knowledge and skills. An educated woman can combat the ills in society and contribute to the workforce's quality, size, and productivity.

As per the 2011 Census, "a person aged seven and above who can both read and write with understanding in any language is treated as literate." Women in India are denied such rights, and as a result, the nation has a low rate of literacy (74.04%), according to the 2011 census. According to the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, "Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope. It is a tool for daily life in modern society. It is a bulwark against poverty and a building block of development, an essential complement to investments in roads, dams, clinics, and factories. Literacy is a platform for democratisation and a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity. Literacy is the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman, and child can realise his or her full potential." Women often encounter challenges in the area of literacy. Literacy impacts the well-being of the present and affects future generations because cultured and educated parents have more knowledgeable and better children (Dre`ze and Sen, 2002). Thus, women's illiteracy is linked to the problem and vulnerability of poverty and resource scarcity; therefore, women's education must be prioritised to reduce the susceptibility of disparity (Dighe, 1991).

India's patriarchal society undermines women's education. It is imperative to prioritize women's education in India, where they make up almost 48.5% of the population. The prevailing gender discrimination poses a significant threat to the nation's progress. Despite being stereotyped as housewives, women have the power to shape generations, as Brigham Young rightly said, "You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation." It is urgent to acknowledge and prioritize women's education to enable the country to advance socially, economically, and politically. Although the Indian Constitution guarantees educational equality, the inadequate implementation of these rights has resulted in pervasive gender-based

discrimination against women in both rural and urban areas.

Gender disparity harms society and the economy as a whole, with women experiencing these problems more than men (World Bank, 2011). The concept of gender disparity begins early in life, as male infants are often preferred over female infants. As women mature, discrimination continues, from lack of proper food and nutrition in the early stages to a lack of educational opportunities (Sharma et al., 2015). In India, the issue of educational disparity is a major concern. According to India's 2011 census, there is a 16% difference between the literacy rates of men and women. Therefore, the issue of educational disparity for females is not only an urgent concern for India but also the world (Katiyar, 2016).

A comprehensive literature review on this issue using a variety of perspectives, from the past and present has been undertaken. According to a comparison of disparity studies in completing school education between North and South India, the former is more pronounced than the latter. (Hussain, 2010). An analysis of district-level differences for Rajasthan, Punjab, and Haryana revealed that these three states are all dealing with serious issues related to inequalities in literacy (Kumar et al., 2016). Rural poverty has a direct impact on the extent of inequality as suggested by a study on gender disparity in Pakistan (Chaudhury, 2007). An additional study contends that there is a significant male-female literacy divide in the rural and urban areas of West Bengal. The main reason is that rural areas have less access to education compared to urban areas (Som and Mishra, 2012). Inequality is more pronounced in hilly areas than in plain areas, according to research on rural disparity in West Bengal (Saha, 2017). Similarly, a block-level analysis of disparity with related determinants for Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal indicates that characteristics such as family size, the proportion of women working in the area, and male literacy had an impact on disparity (Hira and Das, 2018). This paper aims to investigate the district-level figures of North Bengal to examine the gender discrepancy in literacy.

2. OBJECTIVES

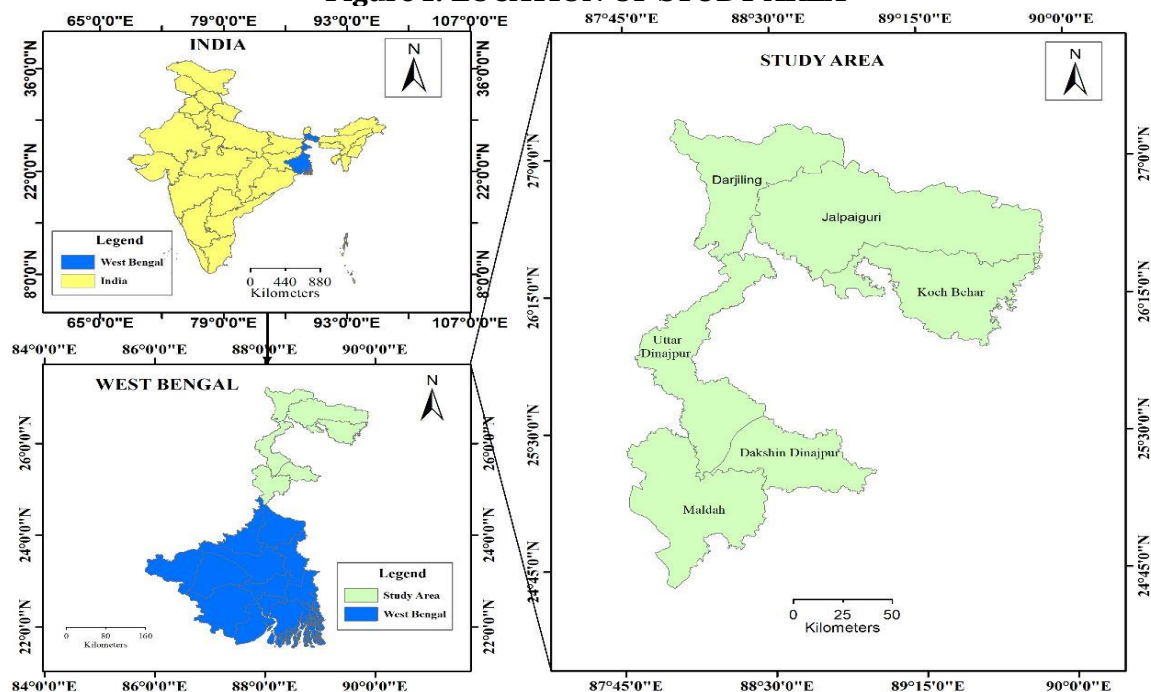
The objectives of this present study include:

- To analyse the district-wise status of female literacy in North Bengal in 2001 & 2011.
- To study the district-wise decadal growth rate of female literacy in North Bengal in 2001 & 2011.
- To examine the gender disparity in literacy of North Bengal, 2011

3. LOCALE OF THE STUDY AREA:

The region chosen for this study, North Bengal, lies in the northern part of West Bengal, to the north of the River Ganges. It comprises of seven districts: Darjiling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar, Maldah, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, and Alipurduar. For the present study, Alipurduar and Kalimpong districts have not been studied as individual districts because the study is based on the census data of 2001 and 2011, and Alipurduar and Kalimpong were created only on 25th June, 2014 and 14th February, 2017 respectively. Geographically, the districts of North Bengal are separated into three regions: the Hill Region, the Tarai and Dooars Region, and the Plain Region extending between 25° 01'N to 27° 20'N and 87° E to 90° E.

Figure 1: LOCATION OF STUDY AREA



Source: Prepared by the author

4. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The current study is exclusively based on secondary data, with a focus to analyse the gender discrepancy or gap in the districts of North Bengal, India. The District Census Handbooks and District Statistical Handbooks of the concerned districts are used to collect data for the analysis.

For the present study, Kundu and Rao's (1985) modified Disparity Index of Sopher's Method (1974) was adopted to analyse the gender disparity in literacy in North Bengal. This modified Kundu and Rao method is a well-accepted and adopted technique to assess the level of disparity (Kundu and Rao, 1986; Kumar, 2014; Saha, 2017; Manjunath and Hurakadli, 2017; Hira and Das, 2018).

$$Ds = \log \frac{X_2}{X_1} + \log \frac{Q - X_1}{Q - X_2} \quad (\text{Kundu and Rao, 1985})$$

Where,

Ds = Gender disparity index,

Q = 200 (constant in Kundu and Rao's method),

X₁ = female literates

X₂ = male literates

And X₂ ≥ X₁, i.e. X₂ is greater than X₁.

If the result is a perfect zero, then there will be no disparity at all. When the value is higher, the amount of disparity will be higher, and vice versa. If the disparity is less than zero, it means that female literacy rates are higher than male literacy rates.

All the statistics tables and figures are created using Microsoft Excel and ArcGIS is used to prepare the location map and choropleth maps of the study area.

5. RESULT, DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

5.1 District-wise female literacy rate (%) in North Bengal and their rankings in 2001 and 2011:

The female literacy rates in different districts in North Bengal in 2001 have been represented by Figure 2 and Table 1 which shows that Darjiling district has the highest female literacy rate at 62.94%, earning it the top rank, while Uttar Dinajpur has the lowest at 36.51%. The second and third ranks are held by Koch Bihar at 56.12% and Dakshin Dinajpur at 54.28%, respectively. Jalpaiguri follows with 52.11%, and Maldah is last at 41.25%.

The districts are categorized into three zones based on female literacy rates: High (54.14% - 62.94%), Moderate (45.33% - 54.13%), and Low (36.51% - 45.32%). Three districts fall into the high female literacy zone: Darjiling in the northwest, Koch Bihar in the northeast, and Dakshin Dinajpur in the southeast. Jalpaiguri falls in the moderate female literacy zone, while Maldah and Uttar Dinajpur are in the low female literacy rate zone.

5.1.1. District-wise female literacy in North Bengal, 2001

Figure 2 and Table 1 also represent the district-wise female literacy rate of North Bengal in 2001. The highest female literacy is found in Darjiling district (62.94%), which holds the first rank and the lowest rank holder is Uttar Dinajpur (36.51%). The districts holding second rank is Koch Bihar (56.12 %) followed by Dakshin Dinajpur (54.28 %). The fourth position is occupied by Jalpaiguri (52.11 %) followed by Maldah (41.25 %).

The districts are divided into three zones according to the female literacy rates: High (54.14% - 62.94 %), Moderate (45.33% - 54.13%), and Low (36.51 % - 45.32%) female literacy rate. Three districts fall in the high female literacy zone (54.14% - 62.94 %), that is Darjiling, located in the northwestern part of the map, Koch Bihar lying in the northeastern corner and Dakshin Dinajpur in the southeastern part. Jalpaiguri district lies in the moderate female literacy zone (45.33% - 54.13%). The low female literacy rate zone (36.51 % - 45.32%) comprises Maldah and Uttar Dinajpur located in the south-western part of the map.

5.1.2. District-wise female literacy in North Bengal, 2011

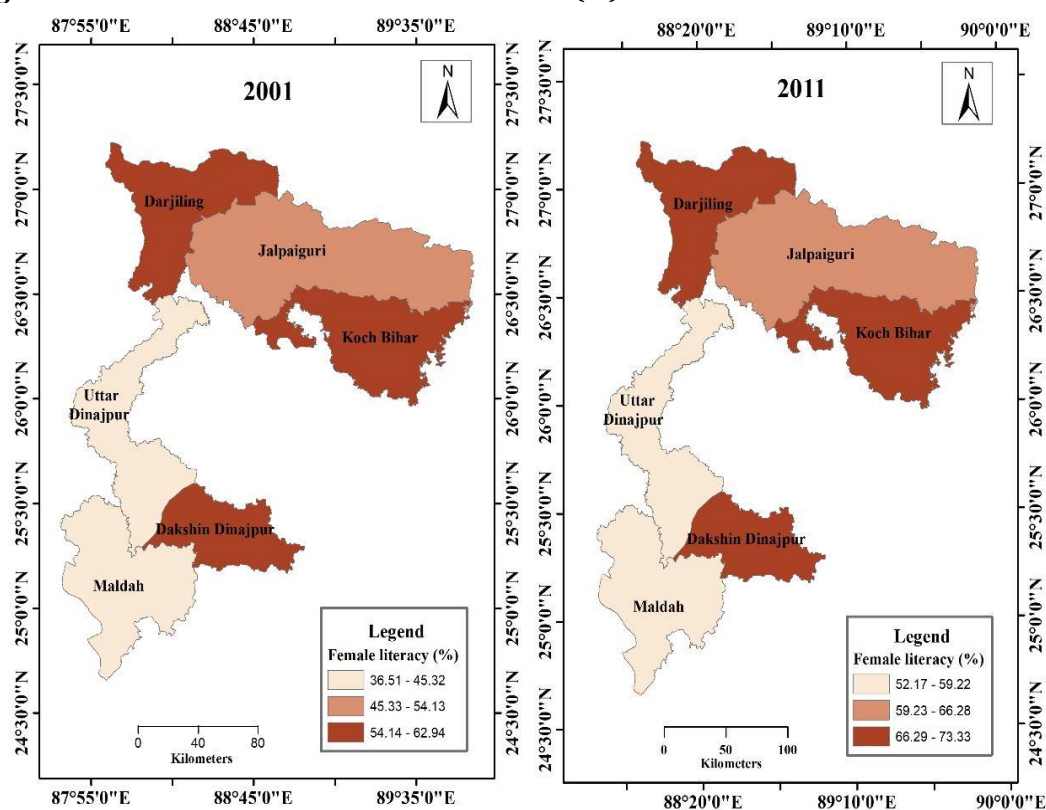
Figure 2 and Table 1 represent the District-wise female literacy rate in North Bengal. During the Census year 2011. Darjiling district (73.33 %) occupies the first rank in female literacy. Dakshin Dinajpur (72.43 %) occupies second rank followed by Koch Bihar (68.49 %), Jalpaiguri (66.23 %), and Maldah (56.96 %). Uttar Dinajpur (52.17 %) has the lowest literacy rate among the other districts of North Bengal.

The districts have been divided into three zones according to female literacy rate: High (66.29- 73.33 %), Moderate (59.23% - 66.28%), and Low (52.17 % - 59.22%) female literacy rate. The zoning portrays a similar trend of literacy as that of the previous decade in North Bengal, except Dakshin Dinajpur, which showed a significant increase in literacy. It has jumped from the third rank in 2001 to second rank in 2011. Darjiling district, Dakshin Dinajpur and Koch Bihar lies in the High female literacy zone (66.29- 73.33 %), Jalpaiguri in the northeastern corner of the map lies in the moderate female literacy zone (59.23% - 66.28%) followed by Maldah and Uttar Dinajpur which had low female literacy (52.17 % - 59.22%).

TABLE 1: DISTRICT-WISE FEMALE LITERACY RATE (%) IN NORTH BENGAL 2001 & 2011

District	Female literacy 2001 (%)	Rank	Female literacy 2011 (%)	Rank
Darjiling	62.94	1	73.33	1
Dakshin Dinajpur	54.28	3	72.43	2
Koch Bihar	56.12	2	68.49	3
Jalpaiguri	52.11	4	66.23	4
Maldah	41.25	5	56.96	5
Uttar Dinajpur	36.51	6	52.17	6
West Bengal	68.64		77.08	

Source: Census of India, West Bengal Series, 2001 & 2011

Figure 2: DISTRICT-WISE LITERACY RATE (%) IN NORTH BENGAL 2001 & 2011

Source: Prepared by the author

6. Decadal Growth Rate in the Percentage of Female Literacy in the Districts of North Bengal:

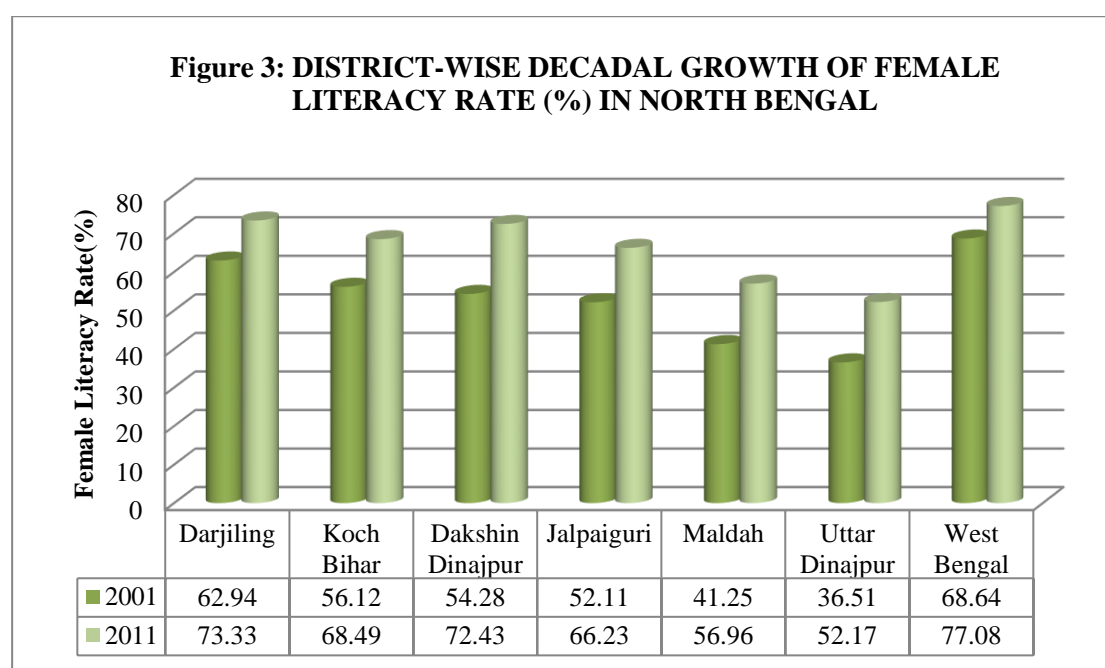
Positive findings are observed during the analysis of the decadal change in female literacy in the districts of North Bengal, based on the census of 2001 and 2011. It provides a ray of hope for the entire area. Over the decade, the female literacy rate has increased commendably in districts like Dakshin Dinajpur and Darjiling. Darjiling, has the highest rate of female literacy in the region at 73.33%, according to the 2011 census, followed by Dakshin Dinajpur, which improved dramatically from 54.28% in 2001 to 72.43% in 2011. According to the 2011 census, Uttar Dinajpur and Maldah with 52.17% and 56.96%, respectively have very low female literacy rates.

But, it is crucial to note that over the years, female literacy has improved even in these places (Table 2, Figure 3). This increase in female literacy unlocks more opportunities for improvement and augmentation, which might be incredibly advantageous for the overall development of the area.

Table 2: DISTRICT - WISE DECADEAL GROWTH RATE (%) OF FEMALE LITERACY IN NORTH BENGAL

District	2001	2011	Change in Female Literacy (%)
	Female Literacy (%)	Female Literacy (%)	
Darjiling	62.94	73.33	10.39
Dakshin Dinajpur	54.28	72.43	16.31
Koch Bihar	56.12	68.49	14.21
Jalpaiguri	52.11	66.23	14.12
Maldah	41.25	56.96	15.71
Uttar Dinajpur	36.51	52.17	15.66
West Bengal	68.64	77.08	8.44

Source: Census of India, West Bengal Series, 2001 & 2011.



Source: Prepared by the author

7. District-Wise Gender disparity in literacy of North Bengal, 2011

Gender disparity in literacy indicates the male-female discrepancy. Based on Kundu and Rao's (1985) modified Gender Disparity Index methodology and the Census data of 2001 and 2011, the gender disparity in literacy between male and female in North Bengal is computed. This method is a well-accepted and adopted technique to assess the level of disparity. If the result is a perfect zero, then there will be no disparity at all. When the value is higher, the amount of disparity will be higher, and vice versa. If the disparity is less than zero, it means that female literacy rates are higher than male literacy rates.

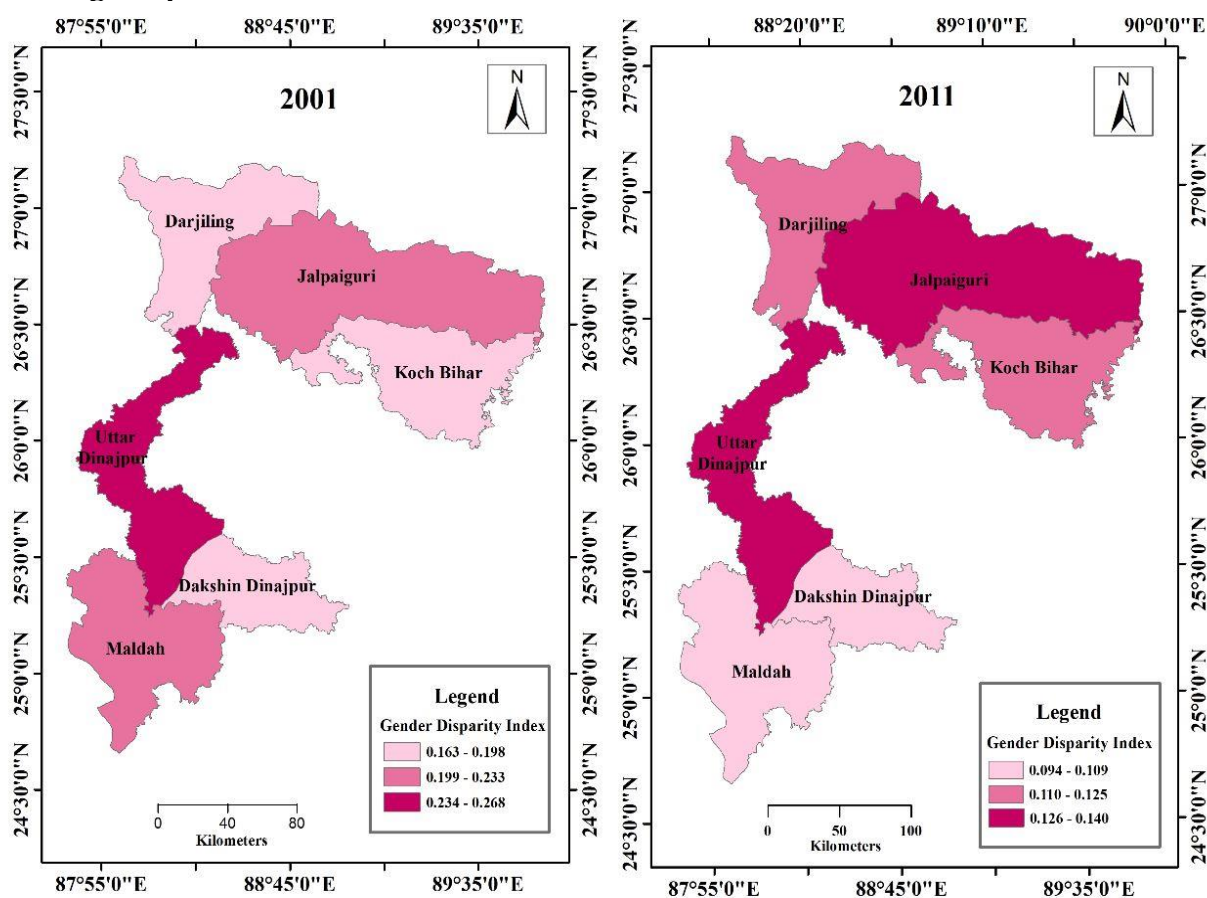
In North Bengal, the districts of Darjiling (0.163), Dakshin Dinajpur (0.183), and Koch Bihar (0.196) are the top three districts having low disparity values between 0.163 – 0.198 during the year 2001 (Table 3, Figure 4). In contrast, Maldah (0.204) and Jalpaiguri (0.210) show moderate disparity values between 0.199 – 0.233. A high disparity value of 0.234 – 0.268 is found in Uttar Dinajpur (0.268).

However, for the year 2011, all districts in North Bengal shifted between a moderate and high level of gender disparity, except Maldah (0.094) and Dakshin Dinajpur (0.107), which has the lowest disparity value between 0.094 – 0.109. The male-female literacy gap in Maldah was low compared to the others, therefore, it secured the first rank in 2011. The computed figures of 2011 also indicate that the educational system in the study area has improved since 2001, as a result of which the disparity values are positively declining. Darjiling (0.112) and Koch Bihar (0.121) followed by Maldah, with a moderate disparity value in between 0.110 – 0.125. Darjiling which had the highest literacy rate in 2011, secured moderate disparity value as it failed to improve the ratio of male-female literacy. For Koch Bihar, the disparity value of 2011 is low compared to the year 2001, but its overall performance declined in terms of disparity. The highest disparity value of 0.126 – 0.140 is found in Jalpaiguri (0.129) and Uttar Dinajpur (0.14) (Table 3, Figure 4). So, it can be said that North Bengal improved in terms of the overall Gender Disparity Index in female literacy. However, some districts need to focus on the male-female literacy gap to reduce their disparity further.

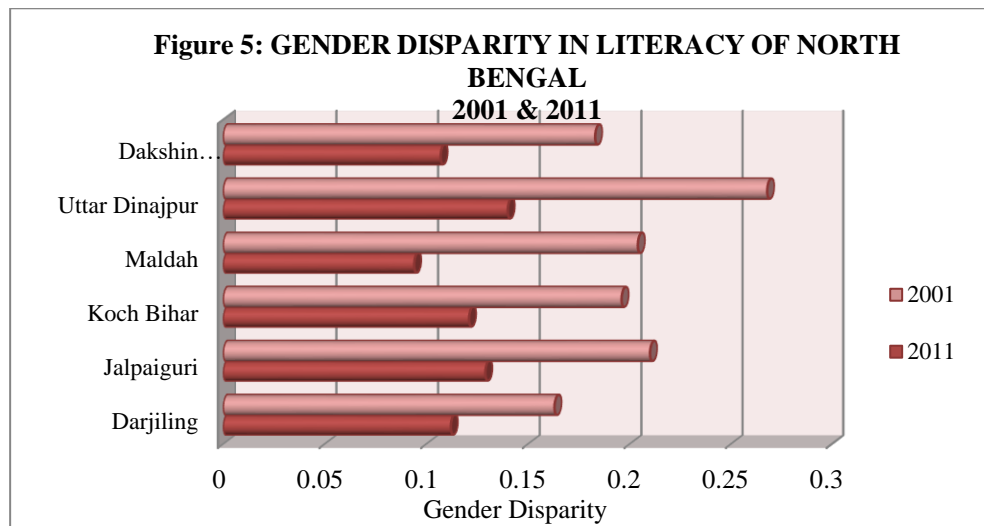
Table 3: GENDER DISPARITY IN LITERACY OF NORTH BENGAL, 2001 & 2011

District	Literacy Rate (%), 2011			Gender disparity index	
	Total	Male	Female	2001	2011
Darjiling	79.92	85.61	73.33	0.163	0.112
Dakshin Dinajpur	73.86	78.37	67.01	0.183	0.107
Koch Bihar	75.49	80.71	68.49	0.196	0.121
Jalpaiguri	73.79	79.95	66.23	0.21	0.129
Maldah	62.71	66.24	56.96	0.204	0.094
Uttar Dinajpur	60.13	65.52	52.17	0.268	0.14
Average Disparity Index				0.204	0.117

Source: Calculated by the author

Figure 4: GENDER DISPARITY IN LITERACY OF NORTH BENGAL 2001 & 2011

Source: Prepared by the author



Source: Prepared by the author

8. Conclusion

As per the above findings and discussions, it is exhibited that the female literacy rate is increasing, not only in the districts of North Bengal but also in West Bengal. Changes have occurred in the female literacy rate, notably in the past decade. The degree of female literacy in the study area varies significantly from region to region. Although female literacy is rising in North Bengal, however, gender disparity still exists, especially in the districts of Uttar Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, and Koch Bihar. The male-female literacy disparity is less in Maldah, Dakshin Dinajpur, and Darjiling. The main reasons for this increase in female literacy and the reduction of gender inequality in literacy in these districts include a rise in female education awareness, improved educational facilities, good infrastructure, and communication accessibility, a variety of government educational initiatives for females, as well as socio-economic development and modernization. Some important Government initiatives to improve female educational standards include Kanyashree Prakalpa, the Rashtriya Avishkar Abhiyan (RAA), and the Early Grade Reading and Numeracy (EGRaN) Program. In addition to the State Government, the Central Government has also taken adequate steps to reduce the gender gap in literacy. However, there still exists a gender gap, not only in education but also in many other facets of society. Men are still treated more superior than women. Hopefully, social equality will triumph soon and gender disparity will be eradicated. To ensure that women can exercise their equal constitutional rights to self-expression and social establishment, the government and every citizen must take equal responsibilities in this regard.

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