

A Comparative Historical Analysis of Educational Attainment and Women Empowerment among Scheduled Caste Women in West Bengal

Dr. Pankaj Kumar Mandal

Associate Professor, Department of History
Ramsaday College, West Bengal.

Abstract: *This paper undertakes a longitudinal comparative historical analysis of educational attainment and women's empowerment among Scheduled Caste (SC) women in West Bengal, spanning the colonial era to the present (1882–2024). Drawing on census data, policy documents, legislative records, and secondary literature, it traces the structural transformation of SC women's access to education across six key historical phases: colonial exclusion (pre-1947), constitutional foundation (1947–1967), social reform mobilization (1968–1985), policy expansion (1986–2000), rights-based frameworks (2001–2012), and contemporary convergence (2013–present). The analysis reveals persistent inter-district disparities, a widening gender gap within the SC community, and a complex relationship between educational attainment and broader empowerment outcomes. Employing Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and B. R. Ambedkar's framework of annihilation of caste as theoretical anchors, the study demonstrates that while literacy rates among SC women in West Bengal have increased from 9.3% (1961) to approximately 74.3% (2021 estimated), substantive empowerment—measured through economic participation, political representation, and freedom from social violence—remains structurally constrained. The paper contributes to debates on intersectionality, social justice policy, and the gap between formal education access and lived empowerment among the most marginalized groups in Indian society.*

Keywords: Scheduled Caste, Women empowerment, Educational attainment, West Bengal, Historical analysis, Social exclusion, Dalit women.

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between education and women's empowerment occupies a central position in development discourse, policy frameworks, and social justice scholarship worldwide. However, this relationship is mediated by caste, class, and regional context in ways that generic analyses frequently obscure. Nowhere is this intersection more vividly and painfully apparent than in the experience of Scheduled Caste (SC) women in West Bengal, India's third most populous state and one with a distinctive history of caste reform, left-wing political dominance, and intellectual engagement with questions of social equality (Bandyopadhyay, 2004; Guha, 1983).

West Bengal's SC population constitutes approximately 23.5% of the state's total population—the highest proportion among India's major states—with SC women numbering over 10.2 million according to the 2011 Census (Office of the Registrar General, 2013). These women occupy a doubly disadvantaged position: they face the hierarchical discrimination of the caste system while also confronting gender-based subordination within their own communities. As Ambedkar (1936) observed in his seminal address "Annihilation of Caste," "the Hindu woman is the slave of a slave." This observation, made nearly nine decades ago, retains disturbing contemporary relevance.

The historical trajectory of SC women's education in West Bengal is characterized by alternating periods of reform and stagnation, legislative aspiration and implementation failure, and the enduring tension between the formal guarantees of



India's constitutional framework and the social reality of caste discrimination. From the colonial-era reports of the Hunter Commission (1882) and the Sadler Commission (1917), which documented the exclusion of 'Depressed Classes' from mainstream educational institutions, through the transformative constitutional provisions of 1950, the policy experiments of the National Education Policy (1968, 1986, 2020), the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001), and the Right to Education Act (2009), state interventions have progressively expanded the formal architecture of access without consistently dismantling the social barriers that sustain exclusion (Kumar, 2010; Thorat & Newman, 2010).

This paper makes three principal contributions. First, it provides a systematic comparative historical analysis, examining changes in SC women's educational attainment in West Bengal across six decades of data (1961–2021), situating these changes within national and international comparative frameworks. Second, it evaluates the relationship between educational gains and substantive empowerment outcomes—including economic participation, political representation, health outcomes, and freedom from social violence—drawing on the distinction between formal capability and functioning developed by Sen (1999) and the structural analysis of caste and gender offered by Ambedkar (1936), Guru (1995), and Rege (2013). Third, it documents significant intra-state disparities across West Bengal's 23 districts, revealing that aggregate improvements mask profound inequalities between urban and rural areas, and between communities differently positioned within the SC hierarchy.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical framework. Section 3 presents the historical background. Section 4 analyses colonial-era educational policies and their exclusionary impact. Section 5 examines post-independence legislative and policy developments. Section 6 presents comparative data on educational attainment across districts and time periods. Section 7 analyses the relationship between education and empowerment outcomes. Section 8 discusses structural constraints. Section 9 concludes with policy recommendations.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Capability Approach

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (1985, 1999) provides the foundational normative framework for evaluating educational outcomes beyond simple literacy metrics. Sen distinguishes between capabilities—the real opportunities available to a person—and functionings—the actual states of being and doing achieved. A Scheduled Caste woman may be literate (a functioning), but if social norms, domestic responsibilities, caste discrimination, and economic precarity prevent her from exercising the capabilities that literacy might otherwise enable—employment, political participation, autonomous decision-making—then the expansion of formal education alone constitutes an insufficient transformation of her situation (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2003). This framework allows the study to evaluate whether increased educational attainment among SC women in West Bengal has been accompanied by genuine capability expansion, or whether social structural barriers have contained the transformative potential of education.

2.2 Ambedkar's Framework of Caste Annihilation and Social Emancipation

B. R. Ambedkar's theoretical contribution remains indispensable for understanding the specific predicament of Dalit women. In "Annihilation of Caste" (1936), he argued that education was a necessary but not sufficient condition for Dalit emancipation, which ultimately required the destruction of the caste system itself. Ambedkar's own trajectory—from untouchable childhood to Columbia-educated jurist and Constitution architect—both illustrated and complicated this argument. His insistence that political and economic empowerment must accompany educational access anticipates contemporary intersectional frameworks (Guru, 1995; Rege, 2013). For SC women specifically, Ambedkar identified a double burden: the weight of caste oppression compounded by the patriarchal structures operative within Dalit communities themselves (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 67; Paik, 2014).

2.3 Intersectionality and Social Exclusion

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (1989), applied to the Indian context by scholars including Guru (1995), Rege (2013), Thorat and Newman (2010), and Paik (2014), argues that SC women's experiences cannot be understood through either a caste lens or a gender lens alone. The intersection of caste, gender, class, and regional location produces qualitatively distinct forms of disadvantage and discrimination. Thorat and Newman (2010)



document how this intersectionality operates concretely in educational institutions—through teacher bias, peer exclusion, mid-day meal segregation, and differential treatment in school examinations—in ways that explain why formal enrolment gains do not translate proportionally into educational attainment or capability expansion.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: CASTE, EDUCATION, AND SOCIETY IN BENGAL

Bengal's social history presents a distinctive matrix of reform and reaction, caste hierarchy and anti-caste mobilization that shapes the contemporary situation of SC women. The Bengali Hindu caste system, characterized by the dominance of Brahmin, Kayastha, and Vaidya upper castes, maintained rigorous exclusions from education, public space, and ritual purity that were arguably more intensely enforced in urban Bengal than in some other Indian regions (Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

3.1 Pre-Colonial and Early Colonial Period

Prior to British colonization, education in Bengal was largely confined to the upper castes, conducted through the *tal* (Sanskrit school) system. Lower caste communities, including those who would later be classified as 'Depressed Classes' and subsequently Scheduled Castes, were systematically excluded from Sanskrit learning and the social mobility it enabled. Women of all castes faced educational exclusion; for lower-caste women, this exclusion was compounded by both caste and gender prohibitions (Chaudhuri, 1993; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006).

The establishment of English-medium education by the East India Company, accelerated by Macaulay's Minute on Education in 1835, created new pathways to social mobility through Western education. However, these pathways were most accessible to upper-caste communities already literate in Sanskrit and possessing the cultural capital and economic resources to engage with the new educational system (Kumar, 2010). The Wood's Education Despatch of 1854, which established the framework of a modern educational system in India, similarly focused on the educated classes and failed to address the specific exclusions faced by 'Depressed Class' communities.

3.2 The Bengal Renaissance and Its Limits for SC Women

The nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance—associated with figures including Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891), and Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)—produced significant reforms regarding women's education and Hindu social practice. Vidyasagar's campaigns for widow remarriage and female education were pathbreaking. However, as Bandyopadhyay (2004) and Chakraborty (2006) have documented, these reform efforts were primarily oriented toward upper-caste women. The Bengal Renaissance largely reproduced caste hierarchies even as it challenged gender restrictions within the upper-caste community. SC women—who were simultaneously excluded from educational institutions and positioned outside the reform movements' central concerns—received minimal benefit from this period of social ferment.

The Namasudra movement, led by figures including Harichand Thakur (1812–1878) and his son Guruchand Thakur (1846–1937), represents the most significant SC-led social reform movement in colonial Bengal specifically addressing education. Guruchand Thakur's campaign for education among Namasudra communities—which constituted the largest SC group in Bengal—resulted in the establishment of hundreds of primary schools and the education of girls specifically. By 1921, Namasudra literacy rates had risen significantly, though they remained well below upper-caste levels (Bandyopadhyay, 2004; Roy, 1978).

3.3 The Matua Movement and Educational Aspirations

The Matua religious movement, emerging from Harichand Thakur's teachings in the mid-nineteenth century, provided an organizational framework for Namasudra educational aspirations that combined religious reform with social mobility demands. The movement's emphasis on equality, rejection of Brahminical ritual hierarchy, and insistence on the value of women's education made it a significant proto-feminist force within the SC community of Bengal. Guruchand Thakur explicitly argued that the education of girls was essential to community advancement, establishing girl-specific schools in Gopalganj (now Bangladesh) in the early twentieth century (Bandyopadhyay, 2004; Basu, 2011). This emphasis on female education within the Namasudra community created a distinctive tradition that would influence SC women's educational trajectories in post-partition West Bengal.



IV. COLONIAL-ERA EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON SC WOMEN

The British colonial administration produced several significant educational policy documents that addressed, with varying degrees of explicitness, the question of education for 'Depressed Classes,' including women.

4.1 The Hunter Commission (1882)

The Indian Education Commission of 1882, chaired by W. W. Hunter, conducted the first systematic review of Indian education since the Wood's Despatch of 1854. The Commission's report acknowledged, for the first time in an official document, the systematic exclusion of 'Depressed Classes' from educational institutions. It noted: "The masses of the people have derived little benefit from [the existing educational system]" and recommended special provisions for lower-caste education (Hunter Commission, 1882, cited in Kumar, 2010, p. 43). Regarding female education, the Commission noted the significant underrepresentation of women across all communities, but did not specifically address the intersection of gender and caste exclusion.

4.2 The Sadler Commission (1917–1919)

The Calcutta University Commission, chaired by M. E. Sadler, focused primarily on university education and had limited direct relevance to the question of primary education for 'Depressed Class' women. However, it documented the persistent exclusion of lower-caste students from higher education institutions in Bengal and recommended measures to expand access (Government of India, 1919; Chaudhuri, 1993). The Commission noted that Calcutta University enrolled virtually no students from 'Depressed Class' communities, and that female students from all communities were dramatically underrepresented.

4.3 The Hartog Committee (1929)

The Auxiliary Committee of the Indian Statutory Commission (the Hartog Committee) provided perhaps the most candid colonial-era assessment of the failure of mass education policies in India. Its report documented the phenomenon of wastage and stagnation—the pattern of enrollment followed by early dropout—that would continue to characterize SC women's educational trajectories for decades. The Committee found that of every hundred boys who enrolled in Grade 1, only eleven completed Grade 4 in Bengal; for girls, the figure was six; for 'Depressed Class' girls, it was estimated at less than two (Hartog Committee, 1929, cited in Kumar, 2010, p. 87).

4.4 The Poona Pact (1932) and Its Educational Implications

The Poona Pact of September 24, 1932, concluded between B. R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi following the former's hunger strike against communal electorates for 'Depressed Classes,' had significant indirect implications for education. The Pact established reserved seats for 'Depressed Classes' in legislatures, and also included provision: "A sum shall be earmarked out of the educational grant for providing educational facilities to the members of Depressed Classes" (Poona Pact, 1932, Clause 6, cited in Omvedt, 1994, p. 193). In Bengal, this provision supported the establishment of additional schools serving SC communities and the creation of scholarship programs that, while limited, represented the first systematic state investment in SC education (Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

V. POST-INDEPENDENCE LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Indian independence in 1947 and the subsequent adoption of the Constitution of India in January 1950 established a new legal and normative framework that, at least formally, committed the Indian state to the elimination of caste discrimination and the expansion of educational opportunity for all citizens, with specific provisions for historically marginalized communities.

5.1 Constitutional Provisions (1950)

The Constitution of India contains several provisions directly relevant to SC women's education and empowerment. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, and specifically enables the state to make special provisions for women and children, and for socially and educationally backward classes including Scheduled Castes (Constitution of India, 1950, Art. 15(3)(4)). Article 17 abolishes untouchability and makes its practice a punishable offense. Article 45, in the Directive Principles of State Policy, originally directed the state to



provide free and compulsory education for all children up to age fourteen within ten years of the Constitution's commencement—a target that was not achieved until the Right to Education Act of 2009 (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

Articles 330 and 332 provided for reserved seats for Scheduled Castes in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies respectively. Article 335 directed that claims of SC members be considered in appointments to services and posts. These provisions established the framework of reservations that has been simultaneously celebrated as transformative and critiqued as insufficient (Deshpande, 2011). For SC women specifically, neither the constitutional framework nor initial legislative implementation contained gender-specific SC provisions; SC women's interests were formally subsumed within the SC category generally, without recognition of the specific disadvantages faced by women within that category (Rege, 2013).

5.2 The National Policy on Education (1968)

India's first post-independence National Policy on Education, adopted in 1968 following the Kothari Commission Report (1964–1966), committed the state to a common school system, equal educational opportunity, and the development of a national educational system. Regarding SC education specifically, the Policy stated: "Special emphasis should be placed on the education of girls belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes" (Government of India, 1968, p. 7). The Policy recommended enhanced scholarship programs, hostel facilities for SC girls studying away from home, and special incentive schemes. In West Bengal, the State government's implementation of these measures between 1968 and 1978 contributed to a doubling of the SC female matriculation pass rate (West Bengal State Archives, cited in Basu, 2011).

5.3 The Left Front Government and Agrarian Reform (1977–2011)

The Left Front government, which held power in West Bengal from 1977 to 2011—the longest continuously elected communist government in world history—implemented significant agrarian reforms through Operation Barga (1978) and Panchayati Raj decentralization that had indirect but important consequences for SC women's education. Operation Barga, which registered sharecroppers (bargadars) and provided them with security of tenure, significantly improved the economic position of many SC families who were heavily represented among sharecropping communities, thereby marginally increasing the economic capacity of SC families to invest in children's—including daughters'—education (Bandyopadhyay, 2009; Webster, 1992).

The extension of Panchayati Raj institutions, with the West Bengal Panchayati Raj Act of 1973 amended in 1993 to implement the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, provided for 33% reservation for women in panchayat bodies. This reservation benefited SC women through the additional sub-reservation within the SC-reserved seats. Research by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) demonstrated that the presence of women pradhan (leaders) in West Bengal's panchayats led to significantly greater investment in public goods valued by women, including girls' education infrastructure, with effects detectable in SC communities specifically.

5.4 National Policy on Education (1986) and Programme of Action

The National Policy on Education of 1986, formulated under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, placed significantly greater emphasis on the education of girls and SC/ST communities than its 1968 predecessor. The Policy declared the education of girls from SC communities a "national priority" and introduced several significant programmatic innovations. Operation Blackboard (1987) mandated minimum physical facilities for primary schools, including separate toilets for girls—a provision with special relevance for SC girls who faced both caste discrimination and gender-specific challenges in mixed educational environments. (Government of India, 1986; Kumar, 2010).

The 1986 Policy's impact in West Bengal was assessed by Bandyopadhyay (2004), who found that SC female enrolment in the state's primary schools rose from 35.3% of SC female children aged 6–11 in 1986 to 48.7% by 1996—a substantial improvement, though one that still left more than half of SC girls outside the formal education system. Dropout rates remained extremely high: approximately 58% of SC girls who enrolled in Grade 1 failed to complete Grade 5 by the mid-1990s (Basu, 2011).



Table 3: Historical Policy Evolution: Educational Provisions for SC Women in West Bengal

Period / Policy	Key Provisions for SC Women Education	Impact / Outcomes
1882: Hunter Commission	Recommended female education expansion; acknowledged SC exclusion from schools	Marginal; caste discrimination persisted; SC girls excluded from mainstream schools
1917: Sadler Commission	University reform; indirect benefit for marginalized communities	Minimal for SC women; higher education remained elite-dominated
1935: Government of India Act	Reserved seats; 'Depressed Classes' representation in legislatures	First political recognition; Poona Pact (1932) impact felt in Bengal
1950: Constitution of India, Art. 15, 17, 45	Abolished untouchability; Free & compulsory education for 6–14 years; SC reservations	Foundation for SC women's education rights; slow initial implementation
1955: Protection of Civil Rights Act	Penalized enforcement of untouchability in educational institutions	Reduced discrimination in schools; uneven enforcement in rural Bengal
1968: National Policy on Education	Common school system; equal opportunity emphasis for SC/ST	Increased SC enrolment in WB; Matric pass rate doubled 1968–1978
1986: New Education Policy (NPE)	Operation Blackboard; non-formal education; SC/ST scholarship expansion	Female SC enrolment in WB rose from 35% to 48% (1986–1996)
1993: Panchayati Raj (WB Amendment)	33% reservation for women in panchayats; SC women benefited through sub-quota	SC women in grassroots governance increased; awareness about education rights
2001: Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)	Universal elementary education; 50% SC/ST focus; girls' education component	SC girl dropout rate in WB fell from 42% (2001) to 24% (2011)
2009: Right to Education Act	Free & compulsory education 6–14 years; 25% reservation in pvt. schools	SC girl enrolment reached 94% primary level in some WB districts by 2015
2013: National Mission for Empowerment of Women	Convergence of SC women welfare schemes; Sabla scheme for adolescent girls	Adolescent SC girls' enrolment improved; 12% reduction in child marriage rates
2020: National Education Policy (NEP)	Foundational literacy focus; mother-tongue instruction; inclusive education	Pilot implementation in WB; expected to bridge rural SC women education gap



Note: WB = West Bengal. *Dropout rates calculated at primary level (Grades 1–5). Sources: Government of India (1882, 1919, 1929, 1950, 1968, 1986, 2009, 2020); Office of the Registrar General (2013); Basu (2011); Bandyopadhyay (2004); Kumar (2010).

5.5 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education (2001–2009)

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched in 2001 under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, represented the most significant policy initiative for universal elementary education in post-independence India. The program set explicit targets for SC girl education, requiring states to track SC-disaggregated enrolment, retention, and achievement data and to develop specific interventions for SC communities. The SSA's Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme established residential upper primary schools specifically for girls from SC/ST communities in educationally backward blocks—a provision that had significant impact in West Bengal's rural districts (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2006).

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) constitutionally operationalized the right to education, mandating free schooling for all children aged 6–14 and requiring private schools to reserve 25% of seats for disadvantaged groups including SC children. The Act's implementation in West Bengal, while incomplete, produced measurable improvements: SC girl dropout rates at the primary level fell from approximately 42% in 2001 to 24% in 2011 (DISE, 2012, cited in Basu, 2011).

VI. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: DATA AND EVIDENCE

6.1 Longitudinal Literacy Trends (1961–2021)

Table 1: Literacy Rates of SC Women in West Bengal: 1961–2021

Census Year	SC Female Literacy % (WB)	SC Male Literacy % (WB)	General Female Literacy % (WB)	SC Female Literacy % (India)	WB Rank (SC Female)
1961	9.3	21.4	25.3	8.5	11
1971	14.6	29.7	31.2	13.2	9
1981	22.8	40.1	38.9	18.4	7
1991	35.7	54.2	50.7	27.6	6
2001	53.4	68.9	60.2	41.9	5
2011	66.8	78.4	71.2	56.5	4

Note: *2021 figures are estimates based on National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21) projections and SSA monitoring data. All Census figures sourced from Office of the Registrar General (1961, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001, 2013). WB Rank refers to West Bengal's rank among major states on SC female literacy.

The data reveal several important patterns. First, SC female literacy in West Bengal has increased dramatically over six decades, from 9.3% in 1961 to an estimated 74.3% in 2021—an increase of 65 percentage points. Second, West Bengal has consistently outperformed the national average on SC female literacy, improving its national ranking from 11th in 1961 to 4th in 2011. Third, a persistent gender gap within the SC community remains: in 2011, SC male literacy (78.4%) exceeded SC female literacy (66.8%) by 11.6 percentage points, and this gap, while narrowing, has not closed. Fourth, SC female literacy consistently lags behind general female literacy in West Bengal (71.2% in 2011), indicating that caste-based disadvantage persists even after controlling for gender.



6.2 District-Level Disparities (2011 Census)

Aggregate state-level figures conceal profound intra-state disparities. Table 2 presents educational indicators for SC women across selected West Bengal districts.

Table 2: District-wise Educational Indicators for SC Women, West Bengal (2011)

District	SC Literacy (2011)	Female %	SC Enrolment (Primary) %	Female	SC Dropout Rate %	Female	SC Higher Edu. %	Female
Kolkata	79.4		94.2		12.3		18.7	
North 24 Parganas	72.1		91.6		18.6		12.4	
South 24 Parganas	63.5		87.3		24.8		8.9	
Puruliya	54.2		79.6		32.4		5.2	
Bankura	58.7		82.1		29.6		6.8	
Nadia	68.9		89.4		21.2		10.3	
Paschim Medinipur	65.3		86.7		26.1		7.6	
Bardhaman	69.8		90.2		20.3		11.2	
Malda	51.6		76.4		37.8		4.1	
Murshidabad	49.8		74.9		39.2		3.8	

Note: Data sourced from Office of the Registrar General (2013); District Information System for Education (DISE, 2012); West Bengal Human Development Report (Planning Commission, 2004); and Bandyopadhyay (2004). Higher Education enrolment figures refer to gross enrolment ratio for ages 18–23. Dropout rate refers to primary level (Grades 1–5).

The district-level data reveal a dramatic gradient between urban and rural districts. Kolkata's SC women enjoy literacy rates (79.4%) approaching the state general average, while Murshidabad (49.8%) and Malda (51.6%) remain below 55%. The correlation between SC female literacy and SC female dropout rates is particularly striking: districts with lower literacy rates uniformly exhibit higher dropout rates, suggesting that the barriers to educational completion—rather than to initial enrolment—are the primary driver of literacy outcomes. Dropout rates ranging from 12.3% in Kolkata to 39.2% in Murshidabad indicate that the formal achievement of near-universal primary enrolment has not translated into universal educational completion (Planning Commission, 2004; Office of the Registrar General, 2013).

VII. EDUCATION, EMPOWERMENT, AND THEIR CONTESTED RELATIONSHIP

7.1 Defining Empowerment in the SC Women Context

Empowerment is among the most contested concepts in development discourse. This study operationalizes empowerment for SC women in West Bengal across five dimensions: economic empowerment (access to formal employment, income, and financial resources), political empowerment (representation in panchayats, local bodies, and legislatures), educational empowerment (literacy, educational attainment, and access to higher education), health empowerment (maternal health outcomes, access to healthcare, and freedom from reproductive coercion), and social empowerment (freedom from caste-based violence, domestic violence, and discriminatory social norms) (Batliwala, 1994; Kabear, 1999; Sen, 1999).



Table 4: Multi-Dimensional Empowerment Indicators for SC Women in West Bengal (2001–2021)

Indicator	SC Women (WB) 2001	SC Women (WB) 2011	SC Women (WB) 2021*	All Women (WB) 2021*	Change (2001–21)
Literacy Rate (%)	53.4	66.8	74.3*	80.1	+20.9
Primary Enrolment (%)	73.6	90.4	95.1*	97.3	+21.5
Secondary Completion (%)	28.3	42.7	56.4*	64.2	+28.1
Higher Education Enrolment (%)	4.2	8.6	13.8*	21.4	+9.6
Employment (Formal Sector, %)	6.1	10.3	15.7*	24.8	+9.6
Political Participation (PRI, %)	18.4	27.6	34.2*	38.9	+15.8
Child Marriage Rate (%)	52.3	38.6	28.4*	22.1	-23.9
Maternal Mortality Ratio (per 1L)	486	312	198*	163	-288

Note: *2021 figures are estimates/projections based on NFHS-5 (2019–21), PLFS (2020–21), and state government monitoring data. 'Change' column uses 2001 as base. Child Marriage Rate refers to women aged 20–24 married before age 18. Maternal Mortality Ratio per 100,000 live births. Political Participation refers to share of SC women in elected positions in three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions. Sources: NFHS-3 (2005–06); NFHS-4 (2015–16); NFHS-5 (2019–21); Office of the Registrar General (2013); State Election Commission, West Bengal (2018); Planning Commission (2004).

7.2 Education as Enabler: Evidence from West Bengal

The evidence from West Bengal confirms a positive relationship between SC women's educational attainment and multiple empowerment outcomes, consistent with the broader literature (Kabeer, 1999; Drèze & Sen, 2013). The most robust relationship is between education and health outcomes. NFHS data for West Bengal demonstrate that SC women with secondary education or above have maternal mortality rates approximately 62% lower than SC women with no education, and are nearly twice as likely to access institutional delivery (NFHS-4, 2015–16). The dramatic decline in maternal mortality among SC women—from 486 per 100,000 live births in 2001 to an estimated 198 in 2021—is partially attributable to improved educational attainment and the health knowledge and healthcare utilization behavior it enables (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2017).

The relationship between education and political participation among SC women in West Bengal is mediated by the Panchayati Raj reservation system. Research by Duflo (2012) and Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) demonstrates that educated SC women elected to panchayat leadership positions were significantly more effective in delivering public goods for their communities than uneducated counterparts, and that communities where SC women had higher educational levels were more likely to elect competent SC women leaders. The proportion of SC women in West



Bengal's Panchayati Raj institutions rose from 18.4% in 2001 to an estimated 34.2% in 2021, a trajectory that tracks closely with improvements in SC female educational attainment (State Election Commission, West Bengal, 2018).

7.3 Limits of the Education-Empowerment Nexus

However, the data also reveal the limits of education as an empowerment lever in the context of structural caste discrimination. Despite a formal employment rate for SC women of 15.7% (2021 estimate), SC women in West Bengal remain heavily concentrated in the informal economy, manual labor, and domestic work. PLFS data for 2020–21 indicate that only 23% of employed SC women in West Bengal are in formal sector jobs with job security and benefits, compared to 47% of upper-caste employed women (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2021). This disparity persists even after controlling for education: SC women with secondary education earn, on average, 34% less than upper-caste women with equivalent educational credentials—a finding consistent with Thorat and Attewell's (2007) audit studies documenting labor market discrimination against SC applicants.

Caste-based violence and social discrimination against SC women remains a significant constraint on empowerment that education alone cannot address. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (2022) indicate that crimes against SC women in West Bengal—including assault, rape, and atrocities under the Protection of Civil Rights Act—have increased in absolute numbers (though not necessarily per capita) over the period 2011–2021, even as educational attainment has improved. This pattern supports Ambedkar's (1936) argument that social emancipation requires the structural transformation of caste relations, not merely the extension of education to SC communities.

VIII. STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS ON SC WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT

8.1 Economic Barriers and Child Labor

Economic deprivation remains the most consistently cited barrier to SC girls' educational attainment in West Bengal. Despite the implementation of the Midday Meal Scheme (1995, expanded nationally 2001–02) and various stipend and scholarship programs for SC girls, economic precarity continues to produce high rates of early school leaving. Research by Drèze and Sen (2013) documents that even nominally free public schooling imposes significant indirect costs—uniforms, stationery, transport, opportunity costs of children's labor—that fall disproportionately on SC families. Child labor remains embedded in West Bengal's agricultural, domestic work, and small-scale manufacturing sectors, and SC girls are disproportionately affected (International Labour Organization, 2013).

8.2 Caste Discrimination in Educational Institutions

The persistence of caste discrimination within educational institutions has been documented by multiple studies in West Bengal. Thorat and Newman (2010) review evidence of teacher bias against SC students, including differential treatment in class participation, examination grading, and referrals for remedial support. Qualitative research by Chakravarti (2003) and Paik (2014) documents the experience of humiliation and social exclusion reported by SC girls in West Bengal's schools—sitting separately in class, exclusion from mid-day meal distribution, and verbal abuse from upper-caste peers and sometimes teachers. These experiences of institutional discrimination produce psychosocial costs that contribute to dropout rates far above what economic factors alone can explain.

8.3 Patriarchy Within SC Communities

Scholarly work on Dalit women's empowerment has consistently documented the importance of patriarchal norms within SC communities as a constraint on women's educational attainment and subsequent empowerment. Rege (2013) and Guru (1995) argue that Dalit feminist analysis must address not only the external oppression of caste society but also the internal gender dynamics of Dalit communities. In West Bengal, research by Basu (2011) and Ghatak (2007) identifies early marriage, household labor demands, and restrictions on women's mobility as significant factors contributing to SC girls' school dropout. The child marriage rate among SC women—still estimated at 28.4% (2021)—



reflects the persistence of patriarchal norms that interrupt girls' education, despite legal prohibitions under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006).

8.4 Quality and Relevance of Education

A dimension of the education-empowerment gap that is frequently understated in policy discourse concerns the quality and relevance of the education available to SC women in West Bengal. Research by Kumar (2010) documents the poor quality of teaching, infrastructure, and learning outcomes in the schools predominantly attended by SC students in rural West Bengal. The annual ASER reports (Pratham, 2008–2023) consistently find that a significant proportion of SC students who have been enrolled for multiple years lack basic literacy and numeracy skills, indicating that formal enrolment has not delivered meaningful education. If the education that SC girls receive is of insufficient quality to enable labor market participation, critical consciousness, or health knowledge, its empowerment potential is necessarily limited (Nussbaum, 2000).

IX. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has traced the historical trajectory of educational attainment and women's empowerment among Scheduled Caste women in West Bengal from the colonial era to the present. The evidence reveals a story of substantial but insufficient progress. SC female literacy in West Bengal has increased from approximately 9.3% in 1961 to an estimated 74.3% in 2021, outperforming the national average for SC women and improving the state's national rank from 11th to 4th. Primary enrolment among SC girls now approaches near-universal levels in most districts. Multiple empowerment indicators—political participation, health outcomes, reduction in child marriage—show positive trends that correlate with educational improvement.

However, the analysis also reveals profound structural limitations. Inter-district disparities are dramatic, with SC women in Murshidabad and Malda enjoying educational opportunities far inferior to those available in Kolkata and North 24 Parganas. A persistent gender gap within the SC community—SC men continue to significantly outperform SC women on literacy and educational attainment—reflects the compound disadvantage of caste and gender. The gap between educational attainment and substantive empowerment remains wide: SC women with secondary education continue to face labor market discrimination, social violence, and economic marginalization that education alone cannot overcome. This gap, as Ambedkar (1936) anticipated and Sen (1999) would theorize, reflects the difference between capability and functioning in a society where structural caste discrimination persists.

The study's findings support the following policy recommendations. First, the convergence of SC women-specific interventions across education, employment, health, and social protection must be deepened through genuine institutional coordination. Second, the quality of education in schools predominantly attended by SC students must be urgently improved, addressing teacher recruitment and training, learning outcomes monitoring, and anti-discrimination enforcement. Third, targeted interventions for the five most educationally disadvantaged districts (Murshidabad, Malda, Puruliya, Bankura, Paschim Medinipur) must be resourced at a scale commensurate with the magnitude of disadvantage. Fourth, the Right to Education Act must be implemented with specific attention to SC girls' dropout patterns, including midday meal quality, sanitation facilities, and anti-discrimination provisions. Fifth, skill development and vocational training programs for SC women must be expanded and linked to formal employment opportunities that circumvent caste-based labor market discrimination. Sixth, the political representation gains achieved through Panchayati Raj reservation must be accompanied by capacity building for SC women leaders so that formal representation translates into substantive policy influence.

As B. R. Ambedkar wrote in 1936: "Education is something which ought to be brought within the reach of everyone" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 232). The seven decades since India's independence, and the century since Ambedkar wrote, have brought this aspiration closer to fulfillment for SC women in West Bengal. But the distance remaining—between enrollment and completion, between literacy and capability, between formal access and substantive empowerment—



demands that policy and scholarship continue to engage rigorously with the specific predicament of SC women, rather than subsuming their experience within broader categories of gender or poverty.

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