

## LITERACY OF MAJOR RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN INDIA: A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract** *Literacy is one of the qualitative aspects of human life and it mirrors the level of development of a country. The present study is an attempt to make a comparative analysis of the literacy rates of the major religious groups of India both in terms of gender and urban-rural differentials. The study is based on the Census 2001 dataset on Religion that was released in the end of 2004. The Census 2011 dataset on Religion would take few more years to come.*

The Indian Census follows the commonly applied definition of literacy as an ability to read and write with understanding. Although literacy is not the same as education, it is nevertheless the first indispensable step towards it (Saini, 1975). As such, literacy rate itself is a good indicator of the socio-economic progress of a country as also of a religious group.

India being a welfare state all its citizens enjoy equal economic, cultural and educational opportunities to grow and progress. But different religious communities show inequality in the level of literacy consequent upon diverse socio-cultural and economic status which causes human group disparities (Hussain and Siddiqui, 2010). Realising non-dominant status and as a mark of acceptance of the distinct identities of different religious groups, some special provisions such as articles 25, 29, 30 and 350 have been made in the Constitution of India to safeguard their educational interests (Masih, 2007). In 2001, the literacy rate for the population aged 7 years and above for the country as a whole stood at 64.8 per cent. Among major religious groups, the literacy rate of the Jain population was the highest at 94.1 per cent, followed by the Christians at 80.3 per cent and the Buddhists at 72.7 per cent. The literacy rate among the Hindus (65.1 per cent)

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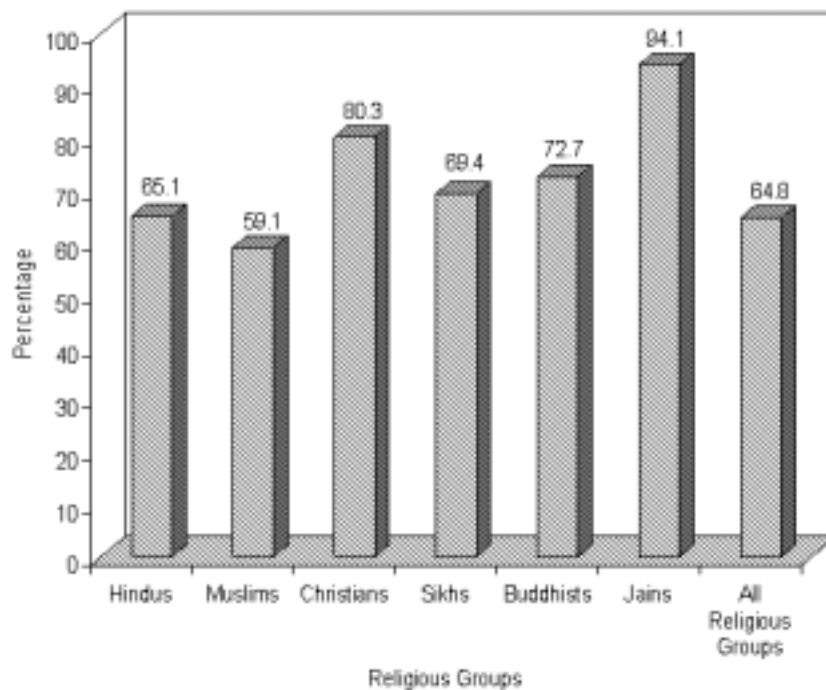
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was slightly higher than the national average (64.8 per cent) but lower than that of the Jains, the Christians, the Buddhists and the Sikhs (Figure 1).

A high proportion of the Hindu population (30.6 per cent) was concentrated in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan and these states were poor on the socio-economic front. Moreover, Hinduism like Islam tends to be more gender restrictive than either Christianity or Buddhism regarding social norms. For instance, the traditional laws of Manu make women non-eligible for all scholastic activities (Stromquist, 1992).

Figure 1  
Literacy Rate among Major Religious Groups in India: 2001



Source: Computed from Census of India, 2001, Religion Data on CD- ROM.

Literacy among the Jains had deeper roots as they were exposed to the preaching of their wandering monks who would deliver lectures on religious scriptures wherever they stayed. Hence, as a community

the Jains had enough incentive to read and write (Gopal, 2010). Moreover, the Jains were wealthy and were one of the first religious groups to take advantage of western education. Furthermore, a high proportion of Jains (76.1 per cent) resided in the urban area and a high percentage of their total population (12.4 per cent) was concentrated in Gujarat, which was the first state in the country to have introduced compulsory education more than a century ago (Ojha, 1966). The high literacy rate of the Christians was largely due to the role played by the Christian missionaries for the spread of literacy. Besides this, the Christians spent higher amount of their household income on education than did the Muslims and the Hindus, thus, signifying that Christians were well aware of the benefits of education (Singh, 2003).

The high literacy rate among the Buddhists was largely due to the social reform movement (Neo-Buddhist Movement) that increased the functional value of education. The high literacy rate among the Sikhs could be traced back to the historical factors such as an early exposure to education, large scale recruitment of the Sikhs in the British army, social reform movements (like the Arya Samaj Movement and the Singh Sabha Movement) and the formation of the Chief Khalsa Diwan. Moreover, a high proportion of Sikhs (75.9 per cent) were concentrated in the state of Punjab that not only allowed but also encouraged the Christian missionaries to undertake educational projects in the state (Government of Punjab, 2004) and was characterised by a widespread network of educational institutions, high rural connectivity, large scale emigration that enhanced the value of education and high per capita income (an outcome of Green Revolution).

Interestingly, the Muslims were the only religious group which had a literacy rate lower than the Hindus (Figure 1). The reasons usually suggested for the educational backwardness of Indian Muslims could be broadly grouped under three main heads: (i) religious traditionalism and backwardness of those professing Islam, (ii) partition of India and the psychological crisis of identity it created for Indian Muslims, and (iii) the deliberate neglect and discrimination against the Muslims by the majority (Hindu) society which professed to be secular but was, in fact, discriminatory whether in education or employment (Kamat, 1981). Moreover, the traditional Islamic injunction restricting

girls to go in for education in public places or institutions-especially higher coeducational institutions-still seem to guide the minds of most of the Muslim parents (Ruhela, 1998). The Hindu, the Christian and the Sikh communities had set up a network of good educational institutions which provided general and professional education. The Muslim community had failed to set up such institutions in large numbers to provide its youth with modern education (Halan, 2007). Over 70 per cent of the Muslims in India are living in rural areas and are marginal and small farmers or self-employed artisans and of the remaining 30 per cent who are living in the towns roughly 80 to 85 per cent are skilled workers, tailors, retailers and in such other professions which do not require a person to be literate (Saxena, 1983).

However, educational backwardness of Indian Muslims should be attributed not to any 'religious fanaticism' or 'minority complex' but to the small size of the middle class whose members can be expected to seek educational opportunities (Ahmed, 1981). Lack of an adequate number of schools and infrastructural facilities in the Muslim dominated areas was a major cause of educational backwardness of this community (GOI, 2006).

There were wide inter-state variations in the literacy rates of the six major religious groups (Table 1). Among the states, the Hindus recorded their highest literacy rate (90.2 per cent) in Kerala and the lowest (47.9 per cent) in Bihar. In Bihar, more than half of the Hindu population aged 7 and above was illiterate. The highest literacy rate among the Muslims (89.4 per cent) was in Kerala and the lowest in Haryana (40.0 per cent). More than half of the Muslims were illiterate in the Muslim majority state of Jammu & Kashmir. Similarly, in the states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Assam also, the Muslim literacy rates were below 50 per cent. Contrastingly, their literacy rate was above 70 per cent in the southern states. Majority of the Muslims residing in the southern states were engaged in tertiary activities that enhanced the need for acquiring education. The literacy scenario of the Christian population was quite bright as in 16 of the 35 states and union territories, their literacy rates were above 80 per cent.

Indian/State/ Union Territories	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs	Buddhists	Jains	All Religious Groups
India	65.1	59.1	80.3	69.4	72.7	94.1	64.8
<b>States</b>							
Andhra Pradesh	59.4	68.0	75.3	78.7	54.8	93.2	60.5
Arunachal P.	64.6	57.7	47.0	92.4	44.9	85.2	54.3
Assam	70.0	48.4	56.4	90.4	69.9	95.3	63.3
Bihar	47.9	42.0	71.1	79.4	59.0	93.3	47.0
Chhattisgarh	63.9	82.5	75.3	89.0	84.9	96.8	64.7
Goa	81.9	75.4	83.8	95.5	82.8	95.7	82.0
Gujarat	68.3	73.5	77.7	85.1	66.9	96.0	69.1
Haryana	69.4	40.0	85.3	68.9	67.4	94.2	67.9
Himachal P	76.8	57.5	82.8	83.0	73.7	96.3	76.5
J& K	71.2	47.3	74.8	85.4	59.7	86.5	55.5
Jharkhand	54.6	55.6	69.7	87.2	74.7	92.8	53.6
Karnataka	65.6	70.1	87.4	83.7	54.8	84.3	66.6
Kerala	90.2	89.4	94.8	92.4	92.1	95.5	90.9
Madhya Pradesh	62.8	70.3	85.8	82.9	74.4	96.2	63.7
Maharashtra	76.2	78.1	91.0	88.9	76.2	95.4	76.9
Manipur	75.3	58.6	65.6	88.5	53.3	94.5	70.5
Meghalaya	69.3	42.7	65.3	74.7	70.8	69.9	62.6
Mizoram	79.3	74.7	93.1	91.8	45.8	61.7	88.8
Nagaland	74.9	48.2	66.2	82.8	74.6	94.5	66.6
Orissa	63.3	71.3	54.9	90.5	71.0	93.3	63.1
Punjab	74.6	51.2	54.6	67.3	72.7	95.9	69.7
Rajasthan	60.2	56.6	83.0	64.7	71.4	94.0	60.4
Sikkim	69.4	57.8	72.4	97.2	67.3	90.7	68.8
Tamilnadu	72.0	82.9	85.8	83.7	86.3	92.2	73.5
Tripura	75.3	60.9	67.9	98.4	49.2	82.9	73.2
Uttar Pradesh	58.0	47.8	72.8	71.9	56.2	93.2	56.3
Uttanchal	74.1	51.1	87.9	73.1	76.3	96.3	71.6
West Bengal	72.4	57.5	69.7	87.2	74.7	92.8	68.6
<b>Union Territories</b>							
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	81.7	89.8	77.0	94.1	91.4	100.0	81.3
Chandigarh	80.5	64.1	88.5	92.0	91.7	97.3	81.9
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	56.5	80.4	64.6	91.7	63.4	94.4	57.6
Daman & Diu	77.7	80.3	88.2	93.0	84.4	94.6	78.2
Delhi	82.8	66.6	94.0	92.1	83.8	96.8	81.7
LashkdwEEP	96.4	86.1	97.4	100.0	100.0	0.0	86.7
Pondicherry	80.3	87.8	87.3	9.9	92.8	96.3	81.2

Source: Computed from Census of India, 2001, Religion Data on CD-ROM.

Note: Population figures for India and Manipur exclude those of Mao Maram, Paomata and Purul sub-divisions of Senapati district of Manipur.

In fact, the literacy rates among the Christians were above 90 per cent in the states of Kerala, Mizoram and Maharashtra and in the union territories of Delhi and Lakshadweep. Education had always been a priority for the Christians in India. Arunachal Pradesh was the only state which displayed a literacy rate of below 50 per cent among the Christians.

The Sikhs recorded the highest literacy rate in Tripura (98.4 per cent) and lowest in Rajasthan (64.7 per cent) among the states. The literacy rates among the Sikhs were above their national average (69.4 per cent) in a whopping 32 of the 35 states and union territories. Surprisingly, in Punjab the literacy rate among the Sikhs (67.3 per cent) was well below their national average. In Haryana and Rajasthan too (the states with sizeable Sikh population), the literacy rates of the Sikhs were below their national average.

The literacy rate among the Buddhists was the highest in Kerala (92.1 per cent) and the lowest in Arunachal Pradesh (44.9 per cent). Arunachal Pradesh is a tribal infested and highly inaccessible area with the traditional Buddhist population. The literacy rates among the Buddhists were above 90 per cent in the union territories of Chandigarh, Lakshadweep, Pondicherry and Andaman & Nicobar Islands; and the state of Kerala. The Jains recorded a remarkably high literacy rate of 94.1 per cent at the national level. Interestingly, in 19 of the 35 states and union territories, their literacy rate was even above their national average (94.1 per cent). Most of the Jain population lived in urban areas and its main economic activities were in the field of business, industry, commerce and professionals (Gupta and Gupta, 2006). The Jains recorded the highest literacy rate among the states in Chhattisgarh (96.8 per cent) and the lowest in Mizoram (61.7 per cent). About two-third of Jains living in Mizoram were cultivators and literary skills were not much required in this profession.

Further analysis of Table 1 reveals that all the six major religious groups recorded very high literacy rates of above 95 per cent in Kerala. This could be seen in the light of infrastructural facilities for schooling and other supporting facilities which were more adequately and better

distributed among regions and social groups in Kerala than in many other states in India (Gasper, 2003). Thus, the state-wise analysis of literacy rate of the religious groups suggested that there was a close relationship between literacy and the economic activity of the religious group. Higher the proportion of a religious group in tertiary activity, higher is its literacy rate. Conversely, higher the proportion of a religious group in primary activity, lower is its literacy rate. The foregoing analysis indicated that certain socio-economic characteristics of the population belonging to different religious groups were closely related to their level of literacy.

### **URBAN-RURAL DIFFERENTIAL IN LITERACY**

All the major religious groups showed wide gap in their urban-rural literacy rates (Table 2). The urban-rural difference in literacy was found by using the urban-rural differential index as used by Krishan and Shyam (1978). The literacy rate was higher in the urban areas than in the rural among all the religious groups. Literacy, like other innovations, originates in urban places and diffuses subsequently into the countryside; the process of literacy begins in the town and trickles down to the village (Krishan and Shyam, 1978). However, the Hindus recorded the widest gap between their urban and rural literacy rates and the narrowest was among the Jains.

Table 2

Urban-Rural Differential in Literacy Rate by Major Religious Groups in India: 2001

Religious Groups	Total	Urban	Rural	Urban-Rural Differential Index*
Hindus	65.09	81.32	59.06	0.34
Muslims	59.13	70.07	52.73	0.29
Christians	80.25	90.90	74.55	0.20
Sikhs	69.45	83.56	64.21	0.28
Buddhists	72.66	81.60	66.93	0.20
Jains	94.08	96.13	87.47	0.09
All Religious Groups	64.84	79.92	58.74	0.33

Source: Computed from Census of India 2001, Religion Data on CD- ROM.

\* Urban-Rural Differential was calculated by using the formula:

This could partly be explained in context to the need for education in rural areas being the greatest among the Jains and the least among the Hindus. Moreover, it seemed that the Jains residing in rural areas were economically more capable as compared to their Hindu counterparts in imparting education to their children. The Christians and the Buddhists both had an urban-rural differential index of 0.20. Similarly, the Muslims and the Sikhs too had almost the same urban-rural differential in literacy. A very high literacy rate in urban areas and not corresponding literacy rate in rural areas explained the wide urban-rural gap in the literacy of the Christians, the Buddhists and the Sikhs. The Muslims were the worst performers in terms of urban and rural literacy rates, while the Jains were the best performers.

Table 3 points out that all the religious groups recorded small urban-rural differential in their literacy rates in the union territories. Union territory being chiefly an urban area is far better equipped with educational facilities and has a high demand for education. Likewise, all the religious groups recorded low urban-rural difference in their literacy rates in Kerala. The state has an extensive availability of schools in rural areas accounting for more than three-fourths of the total schools of the state (Planning Commission, 2008). Contrary to this, a high urban-rural differential index was noticed for all the religious groups in 'Bimaru' and the north-eastern states. Subsistence agriculture and low level of economic development in these states hindered the spread of education to rural areas.

### **GENDER GAP IN LITERACY**

Gender display in literacy is present in almost every country and it can be explained in terms of: (a) the sexual division of labour that assigns women many domestic tasks, especially among poor and rural families, time-consuming chores, and (b) men's control of women's sexuality, which creates both physical and psychological constraints in women's lives (Stromquist, 1992).

Table 3

#### Urban-Rural Differential in Literacy among Major Religious Groups in India: 2001

India/States/Union Territories	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs	Buddhists	Jains	All Groups
India	0.34	0.29	0.20	0.28	0.20	0.09	0.33



States							
Andhra P	0.38	0.19	0.23	0.28	0.15	0.12	0.36
Arunachal P	0.36	0.19	0.68	0.04	0.79	0.30	0.56
Assam	0.30	0.53	0.61	0.08	0.33	0.09	0.41
Bihar	0.60	0.61	0.55	0.41	0.29	0.16	0.60
Chhattisgarh	0.30	0.12	0.28	0.16	0.07	0.03	0.31
Goa	0.07	0.05	0.07	0.02	0.19	0.02	0.06
Gujarat	0.31	0.09	0.42	0.14	-0.03	0.09	0.30
Haryana	0.21	0.38	0.20	0.27	0.21	0.10	0.24
Himachal P	0.18	0.32	0.20	0.15	0.04	0.06	0.18
J & K	0.28	0.43	0.11	0.09	0.36	0.31	0.40
Jharkhand	0.61	0.55	0.40	0.30	0.69	0.23	0.62
Karnataka	0.34	0.20	0.13	0.19	0.38	0.19	0.32
Kerala	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.07	0.02	0.04	0.03
Madhya P	0.35	0.14	0.29	0.30	0.03	0.03	0.34
Maharashtra	0.21	0.09	0.14	0.19	0.14	0.06	0.20
Manipur	0.12	0.20	0.25	0.07	0.56	0.21	0.17
Meghalaya	0.41	0.87	0.42	-0.11	0.42	0.93	0.48
Mizoram	0.32	0.50	0.09	0.05	0.92	0.79	0.17
Nagaland	0.09	0.41	0.40	0.12	0.21	0.26	0.33
Orissa	0.33	0.06	0.61	0.10	0.27	0.09	0.33
Punjab	0.15	0.15	0.37	0.23	0.04	0.06	0.21
Rajasthan	0.37	0.24	0.32	0.31	0.32	0.06	0.35
Sikkim	0.26	-0.02	0.22	0.03	0.29	0.18	0.25
Tamil Nadu	0.23	0.06	0.11	0.27	0.18	0.04	0.22
Tripura	0.24	0.15	0.43	0.02	0.80	0.37	0.27
Uttar Pradesh	0.38	0.23	0.41	0.37	0.28	0.11	0.31
Uttaranchal	0.21	0.27	0.12	0.30	0.18	0.07	0.19
West Bengal	0.23	0.19	0.37	0.14	0.23	0.19	0.26
<b>Union Territories</b>							
Andaman &							
Nicobar Islands	0.07	0.00	0.21	0.03	0.14	0.00	0.10
Chandigarh	0.07	0.09	0.06	0.14	0.09	0.03	0.09
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	0.63	0.07	0.66	0.08	-0.06	0.10	0.61
Daman & Diu	0.08	0.03	-0.02	-0.06	0.04	-0.05	0.08
Delhi	0.05	0.09	0.02	0.13	0.02	0.00	0.05
Lakshadweep	0.04	0.04	-0.01	1.00	1.00	-	0.04
Pondicherry	0.13	0.04	0.10	0.13	-0.09	0.01	0.13

Source: Computed from Census of India, 2001, Religion Data on CD-ROM.

Note: Urban-Rural differential was calculated by using Urban-Rural differential index:

Education of females enhances their capabilities, such as the freedom to participate in political and economic processes, protect oneself against exploitation, exercise personal mobility, attain high social status and increase child and maternal well-being and at the heart of the gender gap is the fact that many of the benefits of female education are societal such as a more productive workforce, lower fertility and lower infant mortality, whereas the costs are private which include tuition fees, uniforms, transport and most importantly, opportunity costs in the shape of foregone child labour (King and Hill, 1993).

Even after more than sixty years of Indian independence, gender disparity in literacy continues and the situation varied from state to state and even within a state from district to district and from one religious group to another. As per the Census 2001, the gender gap in literacy in India was 21.6. In all the religious groups, female literacy rate was lower than male literacy rate. Cultural prejudices, government apathy, lack of political and community will, illiteracy and the negative attitude of parents towards the education of the girl child, cost of education, etc. were some of the factors which had deprived girls and women of their right to education (Planning Commission, 2005). India being largely a patriarchal society, the ideology underlying patriarchy defined women as inferior and subordinate to men and this ultimately got manifested in a wide gender gap in literacy.

At the national level the gender gap in literacy was less than 10 percentage point only among the Jains and the Christians. Contrary to this, the gender gap in literacy was the largest (23.0 per cent) among the Hindus (Table 4).

This spells out economic and social inequality for many women belonging to this religious group. The Hindus were followed by the Muslims which too depicted a large gender gap of 17.5 per cent, thus, bringing out that gender disparity in literacy was more pronounced among the Hindus and the Muslims. The large gender gap in literacy among the Hindus and the Muslims was an outcome of their low female literacy rates. The Muslims recorded the lowest female literacy rate (50.1 per cent), preceded by the Hindus at 53.2 per cent. The low female literacy among the Muslims has been due to the socio-economic

reasons rather than the religious one. Poverty and illiteracy went together and it was a fact that Muslims in India were relatively poor (Engineer, 1994).

Table 4  
Gender Gap in Literacy among Major Religious Groups in  
India: 2001

Religious Groups	Male Literacy	Female Literacy	Gender Gap*
Hindus	76.2	53.2	23.0
Muslims	67.6	50.1	17.5
Christians	84.4	76.2	8.2
Sikhs	75.2	63.1	12.1
Buddhists	83.1	61.7	21.4
Jains	97.4	90.6	6.8
All Religious Groups	75.3	53.7	21.6

Source: Computed from Census of India 2001, Religion Data on CD-ROM.

Note: \*Gender Gap=Male literacy-Female literacy.

Apart from wide variations in gender gap across the religious groups, there were large inter-state differences in male-female literacy rates of the religious groups. The gender gap in literacy among the Hindus was higher than their national average in the 'Bimaru States', the hill state of Uttaranchal and the rural union territory (Dadra & Nagar Haveli). Surprisingly, the Hindus recorded a relatively small gender gap in their literacy rate in the states where they were in minority. The Muslims recorded above their national average gender gap in literacy in the Muslim majority state of Jammu & Kashmir; in north-western parts of Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal states and in the north-eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram ; in 'Bimaru States' and in relatively developed states of Haryana and Gujarat. Strangely, the gender gap in literacy among the Christians was larger than their national average in 24 states and union territories of the country. But interestingly, gender gap in literacy was smaller than their national average in the Christian dominated states of the north-eastern region, in the hill states of Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh and in the southern states of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala.

Table 5  
Gender Gap in Literacy Rate by Major Religious Groups in India:  
2001

India/States/Union Territories	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs	Buddhists	Jains	All Groups
India	23.0	17.5	8.2	12.1	21.4	6.8	21.6
<b>States</b>							
Andhra Pradesh	20.3	17.4	11.2	10.7	27.1	6.9	19.9
Arunachal Pradesh	20.9	20.1	18.5	16.3	20.2	16.0	20.3
Assam	17.0	15.8	16.6	10.9	18.4	4.3	16.7
Bihar	27.8	20.4	9.2	12.3	30.5	4.9	26.6
Chhattisgarh	26.1	16.5	14.5	8.3	16.2	3.9	25.5
Goa	14.7	9.8	10.5	1.1	13.1	1.1	13.0
Gujarat	22.4	19.4	13.0	9.9	25.1	4.9	21.9
Haryana	22.8	34.3	6.8	13.0	22.1	6.8	22.8
Himachal Pradesh <sup>1</sup>	8.1	19.5	5.9	12.9	17.5	2.9	17.9
Jammu & Kashmir	22.1	23.7	21.8	14.1	20.8	5.8	23.6
Jharkhand	29.5	24.9	16.4	10.1	26.3	9.6	28.4
Karnataka	20.3	13.9	6.9	11.0	24.4	13.7	19.2
Kerala	7.1	8.2	2.6	5.5	6.9	4.2	6.5
Madhya Pradesh	26.5	19.7	8.6	11.7	22.9	4.9	25.8
Maharashtra	19.9	13.7	7.2	8.0	21.5	6.0	19.0
Manipur	21.0	33.4	14.8	13.0	28.4	1.8	19.8
Meghalaya	16.3	14.0	3.9	18.0	12.1	8.8	5.8
Mizoram	2.5	21.1	3.5	3.8	21.8	10.2	4.0
Nagaland	14.3	23.2	8.9	14.6	8.1	4.4	9.7
Orissa	25.0	17.4	21.9	8.2	23.2	7.0	24.8
Punjab	11.8	13.9	14.4	11.7	15.6	3.1	11.8
Rajasthan	32.5	30.6	10.6	20.7	29.2	9.3	31.8
Sikkim	16.4	8.0	14.3	11.1	14.5	7.7	15.6
Tamil Nadu	19.0	13.5	8.6	11.3	10.5	7.4	18.0
Tripura	15.5	18.3	20.4	9.6	23.0	8.5	16.1
Uttar Pradesh	28.2	19.9	10.8	15.4	30.1	5.6	26.6
Uttaranchal	24.8	20.1	5.3	17.0	14.8	3.8	23.7
West Bengal	18.0	14.9	14.9	9.4	16.9	7.6	17.4
<b>Union Territories</b>							
				Andaman &			

Nicobar Islands	12.0	5.6	10.2	6.2	11.3	0.0	11.1
Daman & Diu	22.3	14.0	10.9	5.8	28.5	5.9	21.2
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	31.7	12.5	25.8	-13.5	32.3	7.0	31.0
Pondicherry	15.5	11.2	9.4	18.3	-1.0	5.3	14.7
Lakshadweep	0.7	12.0	1.2	100.0	-100	0.0	12.0
Delhi	13.4	13.2	4.6	5.9	14.8	3.5	12.6
Chandigarh	11.0	12.5	6.6	6.6	4.8	2.9	9.6

Source: Computed from Census of India, 2001, Religion Data on CD-ROM.

Note: Population figures for India and Manipur exclude those of Mao Maram, Paomata and Purul sub-divisions of Senapati district of Manipur.

It is evident from Table 5 that the gender gap in literacy among the Sikhs, mainly in the only Sikh majority state of Punjab stood at 11.7 which was smaller than their national average. Similarly, the Buddhists recorded smaller gender gap in literacy than their average gender gap in literacy in the states which had sizeable Buddhist population (Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh). The gender gap in literacy among the Jains was also smaller in the states which had a relatively high proportion of their population (Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat). Thus, one of the important findings that had come out from this table was that there was a negative correlation between gender gap in literacy and majority status of a religious group in the state. Largely, the gender gap in literacy among the minority religious groups was smaller than their national average in the states where they formed the majority or were in high proportion. Conversely, the Hindus depicted larger gender gap in literacy than their national average in the states where they formed a minority religious group. Does it instil a sense of insecurity and lead to a wider gender gap?

### **SPATIAL PATTERNS IN LITERACY**

There were wide variations in the literacy rates of the major religious groups across the districts of the country. While the Hindu literacy ranged between 97.3 per cent in Kupwara (Jammu & Kashmir) and 29.01 per cent in Dantewada (Chhattisgarh), the Muslim literacy ranged between 94.8 per cent in Mahe (Pondicherry) and 26.0 per cent in Purnia (Bihar). It is pertinent to note that the literacy rate of the Christians, the Sikhs, the Buddhists and the Jains ranged between 100 per

cent in Bilaspur (Himachal Pradesh), Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh), Bishnupur (Manipur) and Leh (Jammu & Kashmir) respectively on the one hand; and 29.4 per cent in Rayagada (Orissa), 15.4 per cent in West (Sikkim), 17.0 per cent in Pakaur (Jharkhand) and 13.3 per cent in Mamit (Mizoram) respectively on the other (Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6

Top Ten Districts by Literacy among Major Religious Groups in India: 2001

Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs	Buddhists	Jains
Kupwara (Jammu & Kashmir) (97.3)	Mahe (Pondicherry) (94.8)	Bilaspur (Himachal Pradesh) (100.0)	Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh) (100.0)	Bishnupur (Manipur) (100.0)	Leh (Jammu & Kashmir) (100.0)
Lakshadweep (Lakshadweep) (96.4)	Kottayam (Kerala) (93.8)	Kargil (Jammu & Kashmir) (100.0)	Champhai (Mizoram) (100.0)	Bhadrak (Orissa) (100.0)	Kargil (Jammu & Kashmir) (100.0)
Srinagar (Jammu & Kashmir) (96.0)	Pathanamthitta (Kerala) (92.4)	Kupwara (Jammu & Kashmir) (100.0)	Serchhip (Mizoram) (100.0)	Kendrapara (Orissa) (100.0)	Rajaun (Jammu & Kashmir) (100.0)
Mahe (Pondicherry) (96.0)	Kozhikode (Kerala) (91.3)	Srinagar (Jammu & Kashmir) (100.0)	Saiha (Mizoram) (100.0)	Baudh (Orissa) (100.0)	Lahul & Spiti (Himachal Pradesh) (100.0)
Kottayam (Kerala) (95.0)	Kanniyakumari (Tamil Nadu) (91.1)	Gandhinagar (Gujarat) (100.0)	Golpara (Assam) (100.0)	Sonapur (Orissa) (100.0)	Una (Himachal Pradesh) (100.0)
Baramula (Jammu & Kashmir) (94.4)	Bhandara (Maharashtra) (91.0)	Kozhikode (Kerala) (100.0)	Nayagerh (Orissa) (100.0)	Sebar Kantha (Gujarat) (100.0)	Bilaspur (Himachal Pradesh) (100.0)
Pathanamthitta (Kerala) (93.6)	Kannur (Kerala) (90.8)	Lakshadweep (Lakshadweep) (100.0)	Gajapati (Orissa) (100.0)	Diu (Daman & Diu) (100.0)	Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh) (100.0)
Alappuzha (Kerala) (93.4)	Andamans (Andaman & Nicobar Islands) (90.2)	Sirohi (Madhya Pradesh) (100.0)	Baudh (Orissa) (100.0)	Lakshadweep (Lakshadweep) (100.0)	Champawat (Uttaranchal) (100.0)
Bedgam (Jammu & Kashmir) (93.0)	Thoothukkudi (Tamil Nadu) (90.1)	Mahe (Pondicherry) (100.0)	Sonapur (Orissa) (100.0)	Perambalur (Tamil Nadu) (100.0)	Pashchim Champaran (Bihar) (100.0)
Kannur (Kerala) (92.7)	Thrissur (Kerala) (90.1)	Malappuram (Kerala) (100.0)	Diu (Daman & Diu) (100.0)	Karakal (Pondicherry) (100.0)	Saran (Bihar) (100.0)

Source: Computed from Census of India 2001, Religion Data on CD-ROM.

Table 7  
Bottom Ten Districts by Literacy among Major Religious Groups in India:  
2001

Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs	Buddhists	Jains
Dantewada (Chhattisgarh) (29.01)	Purnia (Bihar) (26.0)	Rayagada (Orissa) (29.4)	West (Sikkim) (15.4)	Pakaur (Jharkhand) (17.0)	Mamit (Mizoram) (13.3)
Makangiri (Orissa) (30.1)	Shrawasti (Uttar Pradesh) (26.1)	Tirap (Arunachal Pradesh) (29.8)	Sheohar (Bihar) (24.4)	Samastpur (Bihar) (22.8)	Gajapati (Orissa) (14.3)
Nabarangapur (Orissa) (32.9)	Madhepura (Bihar) (26.8)	Shrawasti (Uttar Pradesh) (31.7)	Kaushambi (Uttar Pradesh) (38.2)	Khagaria (Bihar) (23.2)	Lakhisara (Bihar) (14.3)
Pakaur (Jharkhand) (33.5)	Katihar (Bihar) (26.8)	Gajapati (Orissa) (34.3)	Banka (Bihar) (38.7)	Mamit (Mizoram) (26.8)	West Khasi Hills (Meghalaya) (18.3)
Balrampur (Uttar Pradesh) (34.4)	Kishanganj (Bihar) (27.0)	East Kameng (Arunachal Pradesh) (37.7)	Aniyalur (Tamil Nadu) (41.4)	Kurukshetra (Haryana) (26.8)	Zunheboto (Nagaland) (20.0)
Koraput (Orissa) (34.6)	Araria (Bihar) (27.6)	Araria (Bihar) (38.0)	Raichur (Karnataka) (41.8)	Tamenglong (Manipur) (28.6)	Debagarh (Orissa) (28.6)
Jhabua (Madhya Pradesh) (34.8)	Pakaur (Jharkhand) (29.7)	Balrampur (Uttar Pradesh) (39.2)	Garhwa (Jharkhand) (42.5)	Balrampur (Uttar Pradesh) (29.8)	Godda (Jharkhand) (29.2)
Sheohar (Bihar) (36.0)	Sheohar (Bihar) (31.3)	Kishanganj (Bihar) (39.4)	Sheikhpura (Bihar) (43.3)	Baramula (Jammu & Kashmir) (33.1)	Shrawasti (Uttar Pradesh) (30.4)
Bahraich (Uttar Pradesh) (36.3)	Supaul (Bihar) (32.2)	Mon (Nagaland) (40.6)	Godda (Jharkhand) (45.1)	Thiruvannur (Tamil Nadu) (33.3)	Garhwa (Jharkhand) (37.3)
Shrawasti (Uttar Pradesh) (36.4)	Jaisalmer (Rajasthan) (32.4)	Sahibganj (Jharkhand) (41.3)	Bagalkot (Karnataka) (47.0)	Makangiri (Orissa) (33.3)	Sheohar (Bihar) (40.0)

Source: Computed from Census of India 2001, Religion Data on CD-ROM.

## CONCLUSIONS

There were much of variations in the literacy rates of the six major religious groups of the country. Their literacy rates varied from 59.1 per cent (among the Muslims) to 94.1 per cent (among the Jains). The variations in their literacy rates were largely an outcome of their geographical positioning, economic activity, need for education and social structure. Moreover, their literacy rates were also the product of certain historical factors such as socio-religious movements like Arya Samaj movement, Singh Sabha movement, Neo-Buddhist movement and the work of the Christian missionaries.

The difference in the literacy rates of the religious groups owed much to the level of literacy of their females. Living in the same country, while only 50.1 per cent of the Muslim females were literate the corresponding figure for the Jain females was an astonishing 90.6 per cent. So, while the literacy figure for the Jain females outmatched the female literacy rates of many of the developed countries of the world, those for the Muslim females was below the female literacy rates of many of the third world countries. Thus, the situation of the Muslim females was much more precarious as only half of the Muslim females were literate.

The gender gap in literacy was the largest among the Hindus (the largest religious group) and not among the Muslims, and was the smallest among the Jains (the smallest religious group). The comparatively smaller gender gap among the Muslims could be seen in the light of their relatively lower male literacy rate as compared to other religious communities. In fact, the Muslims displayed the lowest female as well as male literacy rates among the major religious groups. The low literacy among the Muslims was largely the result of their poor socio-economic conditions.

As far as the urban-rural difference in literacy was concerned, it was the highest among the Hindus and the lowest among the Jains. This could well be explained from the viewpoint that a high proportion of the Hindu population residing in the rural areas was engaged in agricultural and related activities and thus the need to be literate was less. Contrary to this, high proportion of the Jain population residing in the rural areas was engaged in non-agricultural activities, which increased the value of education among them as well as proportion of



literacy. More than religion, it depends on the need of education for a particular occupation, access to the educational facilities, social awareness and economic capability of a religious group that explained urban-rural difference in their literacy rates.

More than religion it was the socio-economic conditions of the religious groups and the level of development of a region which influenced the literacy rate of the different religious groups. Instead of exhibiting a uniform literacy rate independent of regional constraints the religious groups tended to follow the pattern of literacy of the regions in which they were based. The rural-urban concentration, social stratification, level of female literacy and economic activity undertaken by a religious group were some of the factors in a set of complex factors which determined the level of literacy of a religious group.

The value and need for education varied from one religious group to another which explained the differential in their literacy rates. Gender differential in literacy rates was so pervasive that it existed in all the religious groups and across all the states, though in varying magnitude. Education is one of the key inputs for economic growth and development. Any religious group could flourish only when its human resources had developed to the fullest extent. An illiterate population faces many handicaps and problems.

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*Brethren! All in union meet,  
And by devotion to God cast off duality.*

- Guru Granth Sahib, p 1185

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