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# Do scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women legislators mean lower gender-caste gaps in primary schooling in India?



Nafisa Halim <sup>a, \*</sup>, Kathryn M. Yount <sup>b, c</sup>, Solveig Cunningham <sup>b, c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Global Health, Boston University, USA

<sup>b</sup> Hubert Department of Global Health, Emory University, USA

<sup>c</sup> Department of Sociology, Emory University, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Despite India's substantial investments in primary schooling, gaps in schooling persist across gender and caste—with scheduled caste and scheduled tribe (SC/ST) girls being particularly disadvantaged. The representation of SC/ST women in state legislatures may help to mitigate this disadvantage. Specifically, because of her intersecting gender and caste/tribe identities, a SC/ST woman legislator might maintain a strong sense of solidarity especially with SC/ST girls and women, and support legislative policies benefitting SC/ST girls. Consequently, for this reason, we expect that living in a district where SC/ST women represent in state legislatures in a higher proportion may increase SC/ST girls' primary school completion, progression and performance. We tested this hypothesis using district-level data between 2000 and 2004 from the Indian Election Commission, the 2004/5 India Human Development Survey, and the Indian Census of 2001. As expected, the representation of SC/ST women in state legislatures was positively associated with SC/ST girls' grade completion and age-appropriate grade progression but was apparent not SC/ST girls' primary-school performance. SC/ST women's representation in state legislatures may reduce gender-caste gaps in primary-school attainment in India.

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## 1. Introduction

At Independence in 1947, India pledged to legislate policies aiming to improve the social and economic wellbeing of its disadvantaged groups, including scheduled caste and scheduled tribe (SC/ST) members. Considering education as fundamental to wellbeing, India's 1968 and 1986 policies on education stated that the government must take “strenuous” efforts to provide free and compulsory education to all boys and girls up to 14 years of age ([Government of India, 1986](#)). Since then, the government has played an instrumental role in the provision of education. In 2002, the government made an even stronger commitment, allocating to education 12.7% of total public expenditures. This level of spending on education rivals that in China, at 12.8%—with China being the only other Asian country that parallels India in economic growth (India: 6.1%; China: 6.8%, 1980–2014) ([Croft and Kambhampati, 2010](#); WDI 2015).

Still, India has yet to achieve universal primary education, enrolling 11% fewer children than China ([UNICEF, 2011](#)). Despite overall improvements in enrollment, large gaps persist across gender and caste—with SC girls being disadvantaged ([IIPS and](#)

\* Corresponding author. Department of Global Health, Boston University, 801 Massachusetts Avenue, Crosstown Center 3rd Floor, MA 02118, USA.  
E-mail address: [nhalim@bu.edu](mailto:nhalim@bu.edu) (N. Halim).

ORC Macro, 2007; Kingdon, 2007; Mehrotra, 2006). A *gender gap* or difference between boys and girls in primary-school enrollment is evident in all but five states, and certain northern states retain gaps, as high as between 15% and 24% (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2007). A *caste gap* or difference between non-SC and SC children in primary-school enrollment, of at least 6% is evident in all states; certain northern and eastern states have gaps, ranging between 16% and 36% (Deshpande, 2007; Mehrotra, 2006; Wu et al. 2007). However, the largest gaps persist at the intersection of gender and caste. Compared to non-SC boys, SC girls have a much lower level of enrollment in primary-school (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2007; Wu et al. 2007).<sup>1</sup>

In this study, we examine whether gender-caste gaps in primary schooling are lower in districts where SC/ST women's representation in state legislatures is higher. We argue that, amidst large investments in primary schooling, persisting gender-caste gaps may speak more to a *disregard* in policies for the institutional and cultural barriers to primary schooling than it may to a *deficit* in primary-schooling investments. Put differently, primary-schooling investments made, presumably, by non-SC/ST male legislators, may have neither removed nor redressed the sources of discrimination against SC/ST girls at home and school. Indeed, at school, SC/ST children experience avoidance of social and physical interactions from non-SC/ST members. Some non-SC teachers avoid touching SC children's work, and some non-SC students avoid sitting by SC peers or sharing with them utensils or water wells (Desai and Kulkarni, 2008; The PROBE Team, 1999). At home, compared to boys, girls often receive fewer educational investments, perhaps because girls leave the natal family upon marriage and are not expected to provide financial support to parents (Alderman and Gertler, 1997).

For SC/ST girls, the discrimination and hostility they face are the causes and consequences of their lower schooling attainment in India, a society, which is stratified primarily along caste and gender lines. Caste and gender systems ascribe all members of society to a social position, and such systems limit opportunities for status attainment, especially for SC/ST (Beteille, 1969; Fürer-Haimendorf, 1982; Galanter, 1984; Omvedt, 1993) and women (Miller, 1989; Murthi et al., 1995; Jeffery and Basu, 1996). To elaborate, the Hindu caste system stratifies the society into four castes (*varna*) (Vaid, 2014; Desai and Kulkarni, 2008), each associated with a type of occupation: *Brahmin* (priests and teachers), *Kshatriya* (rulers and warriors), *Vaishya* (traders) and *Shudra* (artisans and manual laborers).<sup>2</sup> Scheduled castes, the lowest in the hierarchy, tend to be employed in the occupations (e.g., skinning animal carcasses; butchery of animals; removal of human waste; attendance at cremation groups; washing clothes; fishing) that are considered profane by non-SC members.<sup>3</sup> Scheduled tribes do not belong to a caste because they are not Hindus. Still, scheduled tribes are poor and socially excluded due to differences in customs, practices and geographic isolation. Additionally, the gender system entitles men to more rights and privileges, resulting in many families on son preference, unequal treatment of daughters.

Against this backdrop, we argue that higher prevalence of SC/ST women legislators may improve SC/ST girls' primary schooling by influencing investments needed to mitigate the barriers facing SC/ST girls. We expect that, *ceteris paribus*, SC/ST women's representation in State Legislative Assemblies (SLAs) will be associated with SC/ST girls' primary schooling; non-SC/ST women's representation will have no associations. We test these hypotheses using a unique dataset combining district-level data on state legislatures from the Indian Election Commission, district-level data on socio-economic and demographic attributes from the Indian Census, and individual-level data on grade completion, progression and performance of children ages 8–11 years from the 2005 India Human Development Survey.

This study aims to inform a broader debate on the political economy of human development: does political power afforded to a disadvantaged group lead to improved wellbeing in members of that group? Although practiced in over 100 democracies worldwide (Krook, 2009), reserving seats in political office for disadvantaged groups is controversial. Supporters argue that empowering disadvantaged groups results in policies benefitting all in society at large (Deininger et al., 2015). Critics fear that such political engineering may bring to office individuals who may be unqualified and easily manipulated by traditional elites (Krook, 2009). In India, since 1996, similar sentiments have been echoed in the Lower House of the country's bipartite parliament by the legislators deliberating on the *Women's Reservation Bill* to reserve for women one third of seats in the central and state legislatures (Sanyal, 2008).

## 2. Institutional background

### 2.1. The primary education system in India

Since Independence in 1947, the government of India has repeatedly vouched to provide free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of 14. The *National Policy on Education 1968* called for "strenuous" efforts to be made to fulfill this commitment (Tilak, 1996: 275). The *National Policy on Education 1986* reiterated the goal: "by 1995, all children will be provided free and compulsory education up to 14 years of age" (Government of India, 1986: 12, cited in Tilak, 1996). Further, the 1968 and 1986 policies recommended that schooling should be uniformly structured across all states (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2008).

<sup>1</sup> We used SC/ST, SC, ST or non-SC/ST with intentional reference to those scheduled groups.

<sup>2</sup> Each of these castes is further stratified into many smaller sub-castes (*jatis*), and each sub-caste into even smaller sub-sub castes (Vaid, 2014). In practice, however, caste hierarchies have never been universally accepted as those being of any one type across a region, and they were never fully rigid at any given time (Desai and Kulkarni, 2008; Vaid, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> The justification is "they are so low that they do not deserve to be assigned a caste" (Desai and Kulkarni, 2008: 247).

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