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**Gender disparity in rural Bengal after seven decades of independence: A case study at Balurghat block of Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal**

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**Abstract**

*In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight gender disparity in rural sector of India even prevailing after seventy years of the Independence. Such kind of disparity is common amongst the societies which lag behind considerably in various socio-economic parameters. Gender inequality states the situation when men and women are not in equal terms in respect of sex ratio, literacy rate, job opportunity, career option, work participation rate, empowerment and so on. Balurghat – a C D Block of Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal has been selected as study area to understand the magnitude of the problem of disparity in rural areas of the state of West Bengal. In this block Mahinagar village is surveyed by the author for detail analysis of gender disparity.*

**Keywords:** *Gender disparity, Gender inequality, Sex-ratio, Literacy rate, Work participation rate, Empowerment*

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**Introduction**

Though the extent may vary from one society to another, a sharp socio-economic difference exists between men and women in all countries over the world. In India too, from ancient times men have enjoyed more privilege than women both among the advanced and backward societies of the country. The situation remains the same till date. In spite of having equal and

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comparable education and similar job responsibilities women are paid less compared to men. These socio-economic inequalities are more prevalent in rural India.

Though in most of the countries this gender pay-gap has come down with time, in Indian villages it still exists. In rural areas, women are mostly uneducated and they are engaged in unskilled menial jobs where pay is low and working hours are long. As the families are dominated by the male members, women have very little influence on household decisions. In many families women are not even allowed to spend their hard-earned money at their own will. In addition they face horrifying experiences in their daily life like domestic violence, dowry, early marriage, sexual harassment etc.

**Study Area:** My study area Balurghat Community Block is located in the southeastern part of Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal. This district has two sub-divisions namely Balurghat Sadar or Sub-division and Gangarampur. Balurghat Community Development block is the Headquarter of Balurghat Sub-division. This block has the highest number of villages (307 nos.) and 1(one) municipal town of the district. It is surrounded by 3(three) other blocks of Dakshin Dinajpur namely Tapan at the west, Kumarganj at the north, Hilli at the east and by Bangladesh at the south and south-east. Balurghat with a total geographical area of 368.74 sq. km has a population of 250764 persons according to the 2011 census. There is discernible gender disparity within the society in terms of sex ratio, literacy rate and opportunity for employment etc. Here the second lowest sex ratio of the district has been observed. Moreover the gap between male and female literacy rate also exists here. This gap is around 13% according to the 2011 census data. The economy of the area is mainly based on agriculture. The female work participation rate is low here compared to male work participation.

**Statement of the Problem:** The socio-economic and demographic status of women in Dakshin Dinajpur district is well behind the status of male population. Different studies in this area reveal that spread of women education, job opportunity for women in different field of economic activities and women participation in politics have increased the status of women to a certain extent compared to the last decade. In spite of the situation of rural and backward class women is worse. Low literacy rate among women and fewer women participation in secondary and tertiary sectors of economy show that gender inequality persists in the study area. The reasons behind this backwardness are poverty, poor

educational background, limited scope of employment, lack of awareness about women empowerment etc.

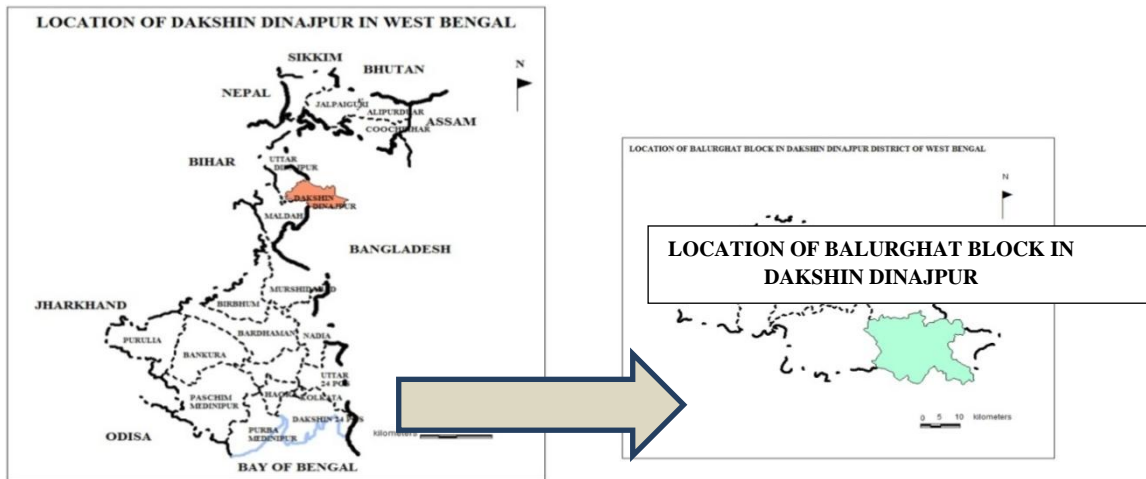


Fig: 1. LOCATION OF BALURGHAT BLOCK IN DAKSHIN DINAJPUR

### Objectives:

- To examine the position of women in society in the context of gender ratio.
- To compare female literacy rate and female employment with those of men.
- To study women empowerment in the study area.

**Methodology:** The methodology to be followed:-

- Pre-field Method – It includes collection of literature and information from government and non-government offices, internet services etc.
- Field Work – It is conducted mainly for collection of primary data with the help of a formatted questionnaire and for field photographs. Random sampling techniques in have been applied for primary data collection.
- Post-field Work – It involves analysis of primary and secondary data, application cartographical and statistical techniques, preparation of maps with the help of GIS techniques and report writing.

### Discussion:

**(1)Sex Ratio:** Sex ratio is an important indicator of gender disparity. It means the number

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of females per thousand males. In the Indian scenario negligence towards women during childhood and woman hood has a telling effect on their health, coupled with maternal mortality result in skewed sex ratio. This is also true for the present study area. Sex ratio in the study area accounts for 940 per 1000 male according to 2011 census which is lower than the district average of 956 in 2011. The sex ratio in the rural part of the district is also high, i.e., 952 according to 2011 census. This portrays that gender disparity exists in the study area.

Table:1

**C D BLOCKS** **SEX RATIO**  
(Per 1000 male)

BALURGHAT	940
BANSIHARI	958
GANGARAMPUR	933
HARIRAMPUR	982
HILLI	949
KUMARGANJ	942
KUSHMANDI	981
TAPAN	950

SOURCE: DISTRICT CENSUS HANDBOOK OF DAKSHIN DINAJPUR (2011)

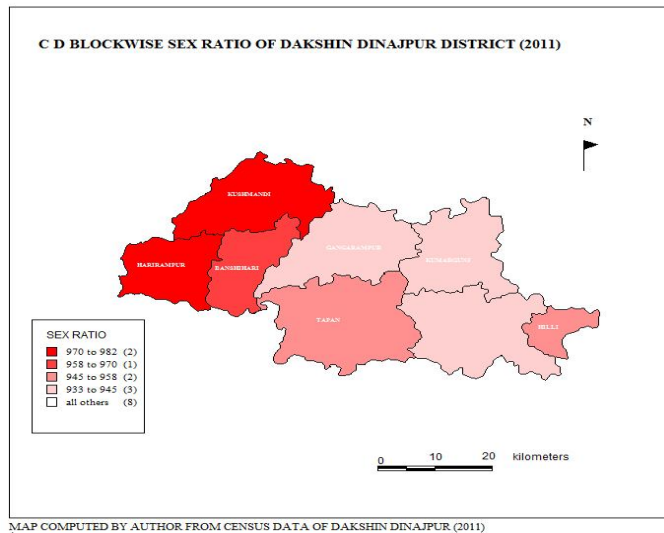


Fig:2. DISTRIBUTION OF SEX RATIO IN EIGHT CD BLOCKS OF DAKSHIN DINAJPUR DISTRICT

The census data on Sex Ratio in Table:1 as well as Fig: 2 show Balurghat block has an abject sex ratio of 940 per 1000 male, the 2<sup>nd</sup> lowest among the eight CD blocks of Dakshin Dinajpur. Harirampur block on the other hand, has the highest sex ratio of 982 after

Gangarampur block having the lowest sex ratio of only 933. So the difference between Harirampur and Balurghat is 42 and between Gangarampur and Balurghatis only 7. This depicts a strong gender disparity in terms of sex ratio in so far as Balurghat block is concerned.

**(2)LIRERACY RATE:** Education provides a strong base on which social, economic and cultural growth of a nation depends. Improvement in literacy rate among citizens, inter alia means improvement in their future income level and health status. Female literacy rate, however, when aslant is another indicator of gender disparity. Widening disparity among female compared to male literacy means poor social development. Like many other blocks of West Bengal the study area also experiences such disparity. For example, the 2011 census of the Dakshin Dinajpur district shows that at Balurghat block the number of literate male is 93,736 persons (80.25%) whereas the number of literate female is only 73,617 persons (67.25%).

The spatial pattern of literacy based disparity within the district exhibits that in each C D block the gap in male- female literacy rate is more than 10%. In Balurghat block this gap is 13% which ranks 6<sup>th</sup> from the top out of the eight C D blocks of the district (Table:2).Kumarganj block has the lowest male-female literacy gap (10.31%) while Harirampur has the highest male- female literacy gap (13.45%). This means that Balurghat and Harirampur have a long way to go to do away with the present a skewed male- female literacy pattern. The difference between these two blocks is only 0.45%. Fig:3 shows the blockwise and gender wise gap in literacy rate according to the 2011 census data.

Table: 2

C D BLOCKS	LITERACY RATE (%)	
	MALE	FEMALE
BALURGHAT	80.25	67.25
BANSIHARI	75.21	62.06
GANGARAMPUR	77.03	65.47
HARIRAMPUR	71.45	58
HILLI	81.98	69.77
KUMARGANJ	79.56	69.25
KUSHMANDI	71.82	58.95
TAPAN	74.24	62.69

SOURCE: DISTRICT CENSUS HANDBOOK OF DAKSHIN DINAJPUR (2011)

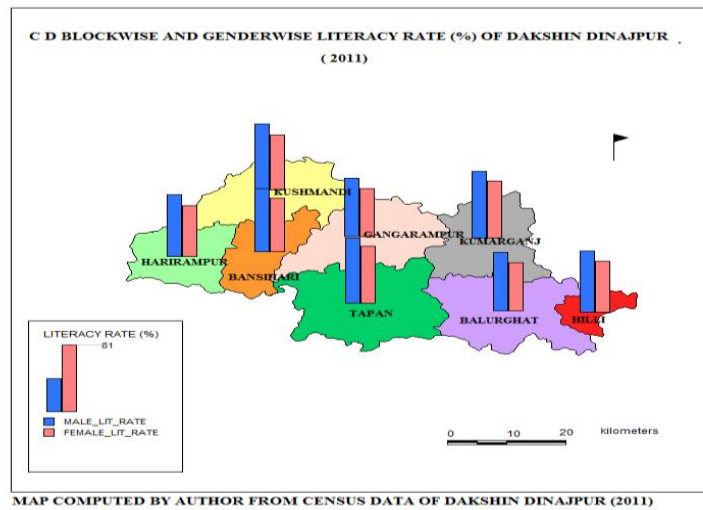


Fig: 3. DISPARITY IN LITERACY RATE IN THE STUDY AREA

**(3)Work Participation:** The general view against women that they are unsuitable for hard work tie them back primarily to household activities. Women participation in economic activities apart from household work in India is one of the lowest in the world. In Dakshin Dinajpur district it is found that the difference in number between male and female total workers is very high in Balurghat block which is about 43,634 persons after Gangarampur block. This is shown in Fig:4. Most of the women labour force has been found to be engaged in primary activities like cultivation. Higher share in agricultural workers mean lower level of economic status. This is also true for this study area where percentage of female workers is only 29.11 according to the 2011 census and among them only 7.85% of women workers are engaged as main cultivators and 22.43% as main agricultural labour. Their share of this percentage in the secondary sector is very low, i.e, only 4.33%. This is illustrated in the bar diagram below, i.e, in Fig:5.

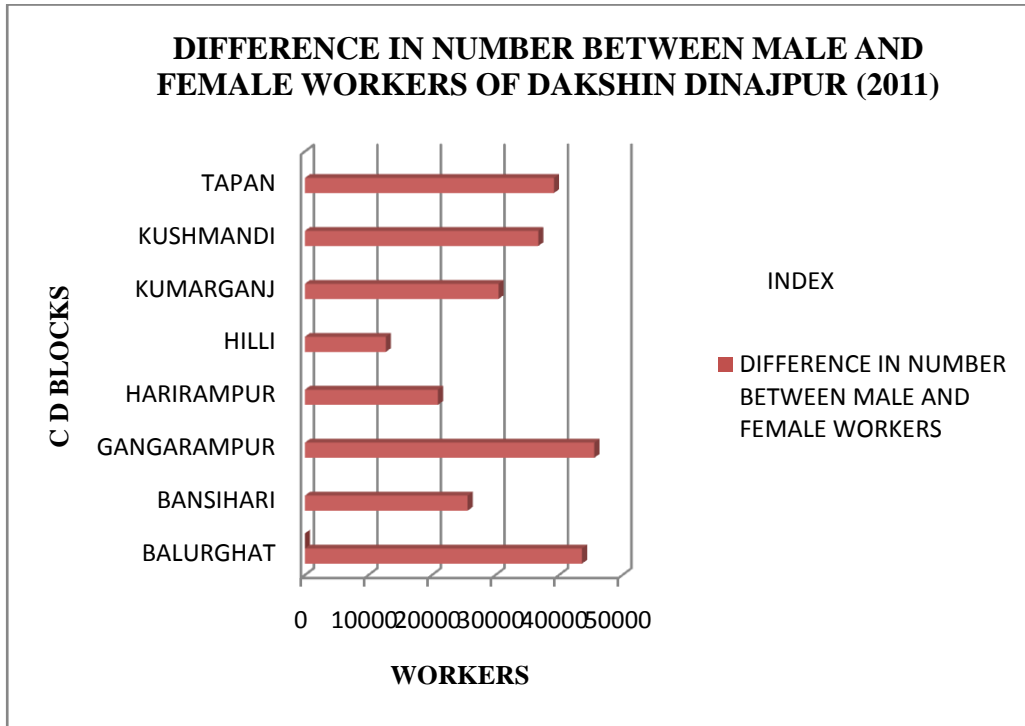


Fig. 4

SOURCE: DISTRICT CENSUS HANDBOOK OF DAKSHIN DINAJPUR (2011)

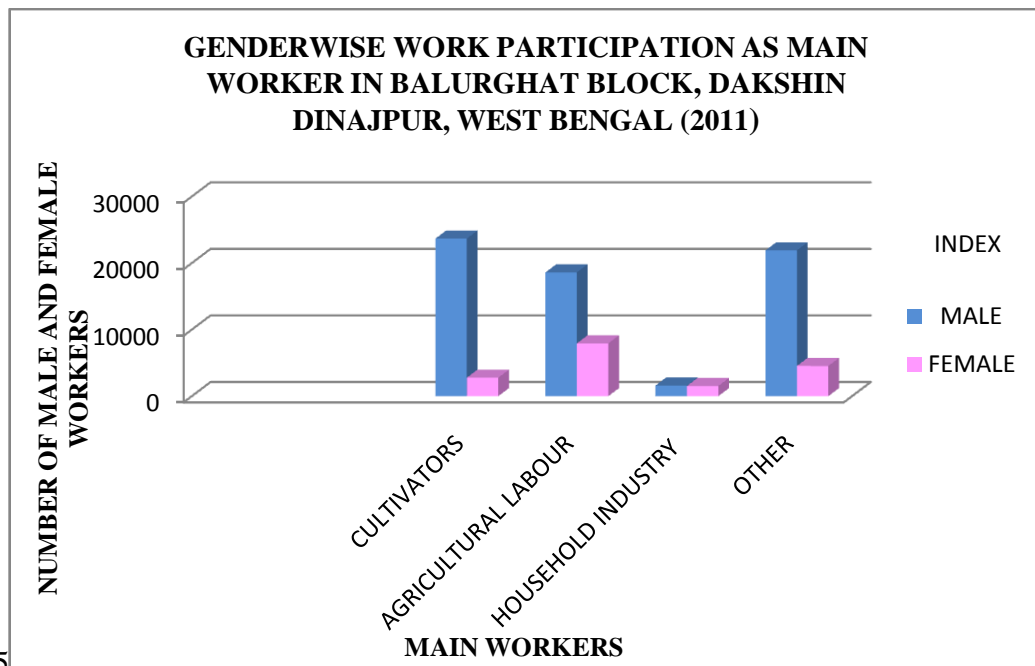


Fig. 5

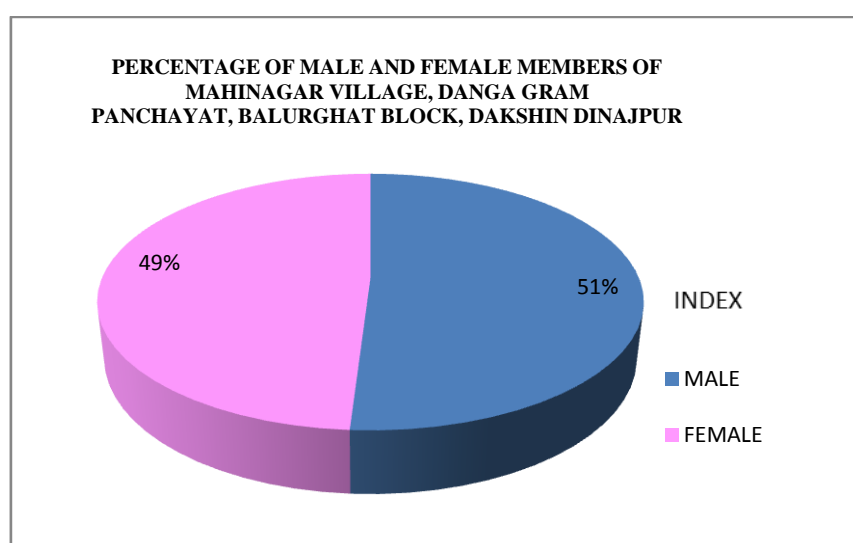
SOURCE: DISTRICT CENSUS HANDBOOK OF DAKSHIN DINAJPUR (2011)

**(4) Results of Case Study:** Intensive survey for case study has been done at Mahinagar village of Danga Gram Panchayat of Balurghat Block. Mahinagar is mainly inhabited by tribal people and is situated 10 kilometers away from Balurghat town. The total geographical area of the village is 1.82 sq. km. According to the 2011 census, there are about 369

households in the village with a total population of 1523 persons. Out of which male and female population are 781 and 742 respectively. The average sex ratio of the village is 950. The census data show that literacy rate of the village is poor, i.e, 69.95% only. Male literacy rate is 76 % and female literacy rate is 63.64%. Here paddy is the main cultivated crop. But the work profile shows marginal workers are more (50.67%) than main workers (49.33%).

The common features which depict the social and economic characteristics of this village is that all the villagers belong to scheduled tribe categories and all the families live below the poverty line. The families are of nuclear type. People live in their own “kachha” type houses. They have poor toilet facility and their toilets are away from their home. They have no ownership on land which they till. Paddy is the main cultivated crop here. Apart from this many of the villagers are employed in unorganized sector such as in construction of roads, flyovers, buildings etc. Tube well is their main source of drinking water and most of the families use kerosene as domestic fuel. About 54 % of the families use cycles as their only means of transport. Very few families have access to electrical and electronic gadgets like T.V., cellphone etc. Only 18 % of the families have their own T.V and 10 % have cellphones.

The village under survey is male dominated although they belong to scheduled tribe category. Men are considered as the head of the family even if they are old or sick or handicapped or unemployed. Women however are not allowed to take any decision in family matter even if they earn good for the family.



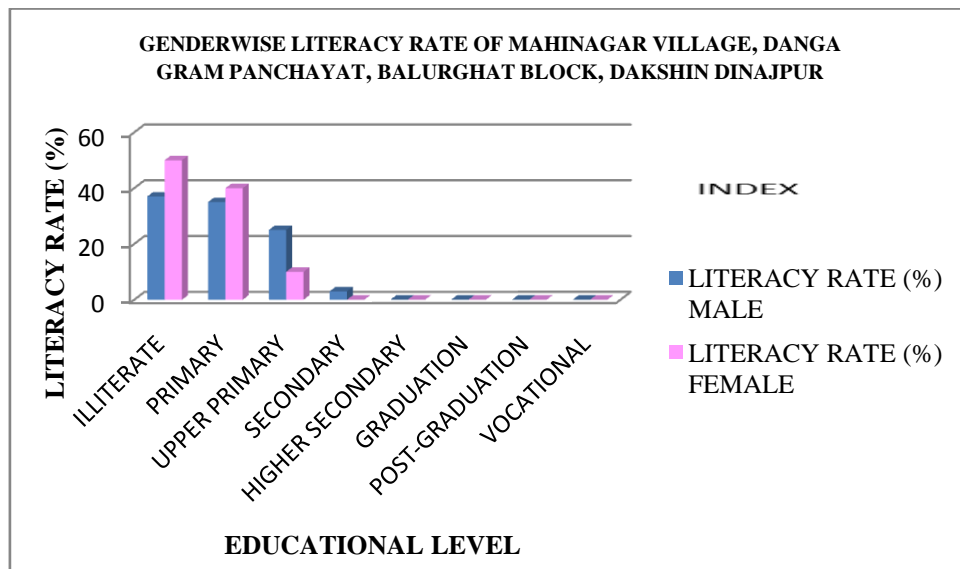
SOURCE: PRIMARY DATA

Fig: 6. SHARE OF MALE- FEMALE POPULATION AT MAHINAGAR VILLAGE



The percentages of male and female population in the surveyed households are depicted in Fig.6. The diagram shows that the difference between male and female population in the surveyed village is not so high and it is to the true of only 51 % and 49 % respectively.

Educational level in this village is to a great extent rudimentary. The maximum educational qualification found among the female folk is that of upper primary stage and the same in case of male is that of secondary stage. From the Fig. 7 it is observed that the number of illiterate people in the surveyed households of the village is large for male and female population by 37 % and 50 % respectively. Hence there is gender gap in so far as literacy is concerned. Here only 35 % of male and 40 % of female members studied up to primary level, i.e., up to class v and 25 % of male and 10 % of female studied up to the upper primary stage, i.e., up to class viii. Only 3 % of the surveyed male members have educational background up to the secondary stage. Not a single person has been found in the village who is educated beyond the secondary stage. Hence both the trend lines for male and female literacy rates in higher studies are down sloping (Fig:8).



SOURCE: PRIMARY DATA

Fig: 7. GENDER- BASED LITERACY RATE

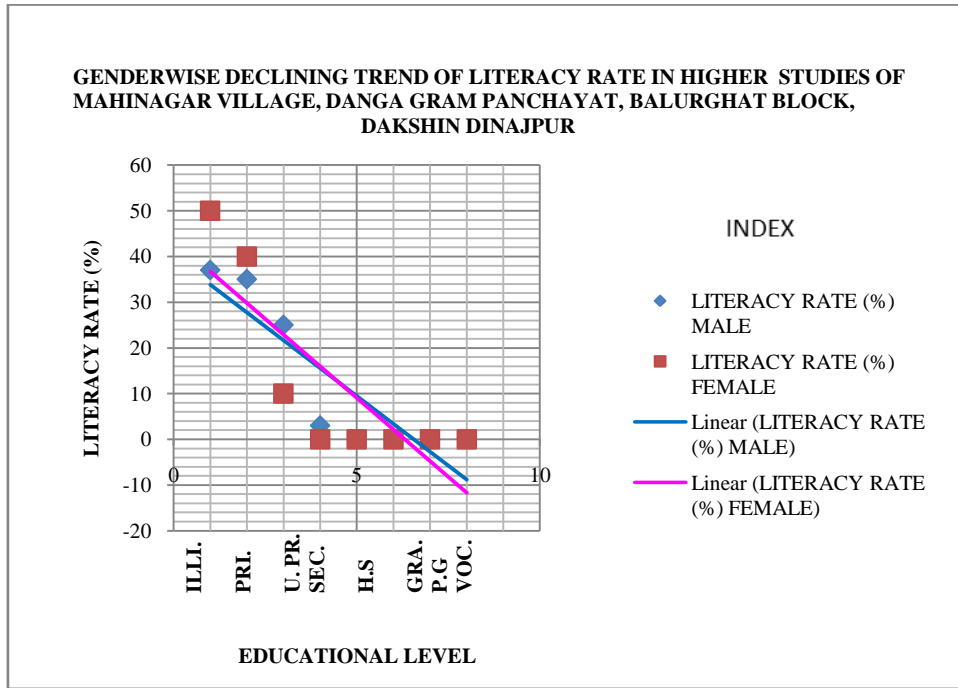


Fig: 8. MALE – FEMALE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

People thus surveyed have opined that poverty is the main reason for their educational backwardness in education. Some female members further agreed that early marriage is another factor for their poor educational background.

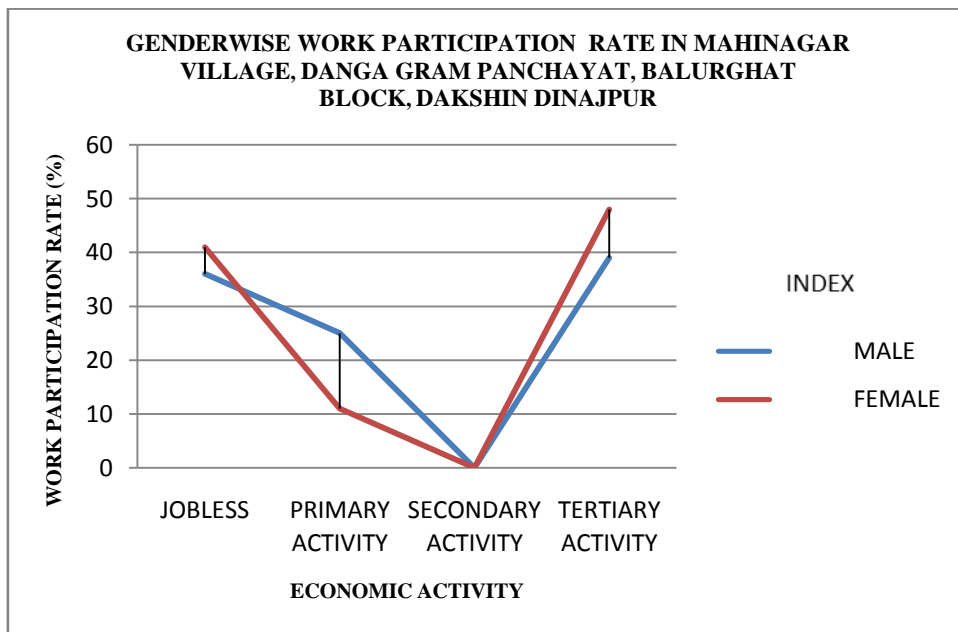


Fig: 9. MALE – FEMALE WORK PARTICIPATION RATE

It is well known that education is an indicator of job and income security. The surveyed data depicted in Fig.9 show that there is no permanent job for the villagers irrespective of their gender. Fig.9 shows about 36 % of surveyed men and 41 % of women are jobless. Only 25 % of male and 11 % of female are engaged in farming, though they are all marginal workers with no secured income. In tertiary activity, however, the trend is opposite. About 39 % of male workers and 48 % of female workers are engaged in unorganized sector, like in construction of road and building etc. Driving automobile is another occupation where the male members dominate. Those who are engaged in construction work are not regular employees. Here also gender disparity is found. Female workers are not paid at par with their male co-workers. Female workers paid only Rs. 180 per day for their work whereas men workers paid Rs. 250 per day for the same work and sometimes female workers are verbally abused by their male co-workers.

**Concluding Remarks:** The discussion done at the above proves that there exists undeniable disparity among the male and female population in the study area like other parts of the state of West Bengal. The women of this area are lagging in terms of sex ratio, literacy rate and employment opportunity. Poor literacy rate among the women make them gives them less worthy for job opportunity. This situation stifles their voice for equal rights. The area therefore needs improvement in catering education though literacy programme, adult education and correspondence courses so that women can claim better job, self-respect and dignity. Though the girl students of this village get some benefit from government facilities like Kanyashree and Sikshasree prakalpa etc. But these are not enough to change their overall scenario plight. The local panchayats may give more emphasis on reducing gender gap.

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