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## BOOKS

# Subnationalism Might be the Key to Social Development in India

Prerna Singh's book, 'How Solidarity Works for Welfare: Subnationalism and Social Development in India', establishes a connection between subnationalism and social indices.

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India has a number of large states, the populations of which are equivalent to mid-sized countries. But their size

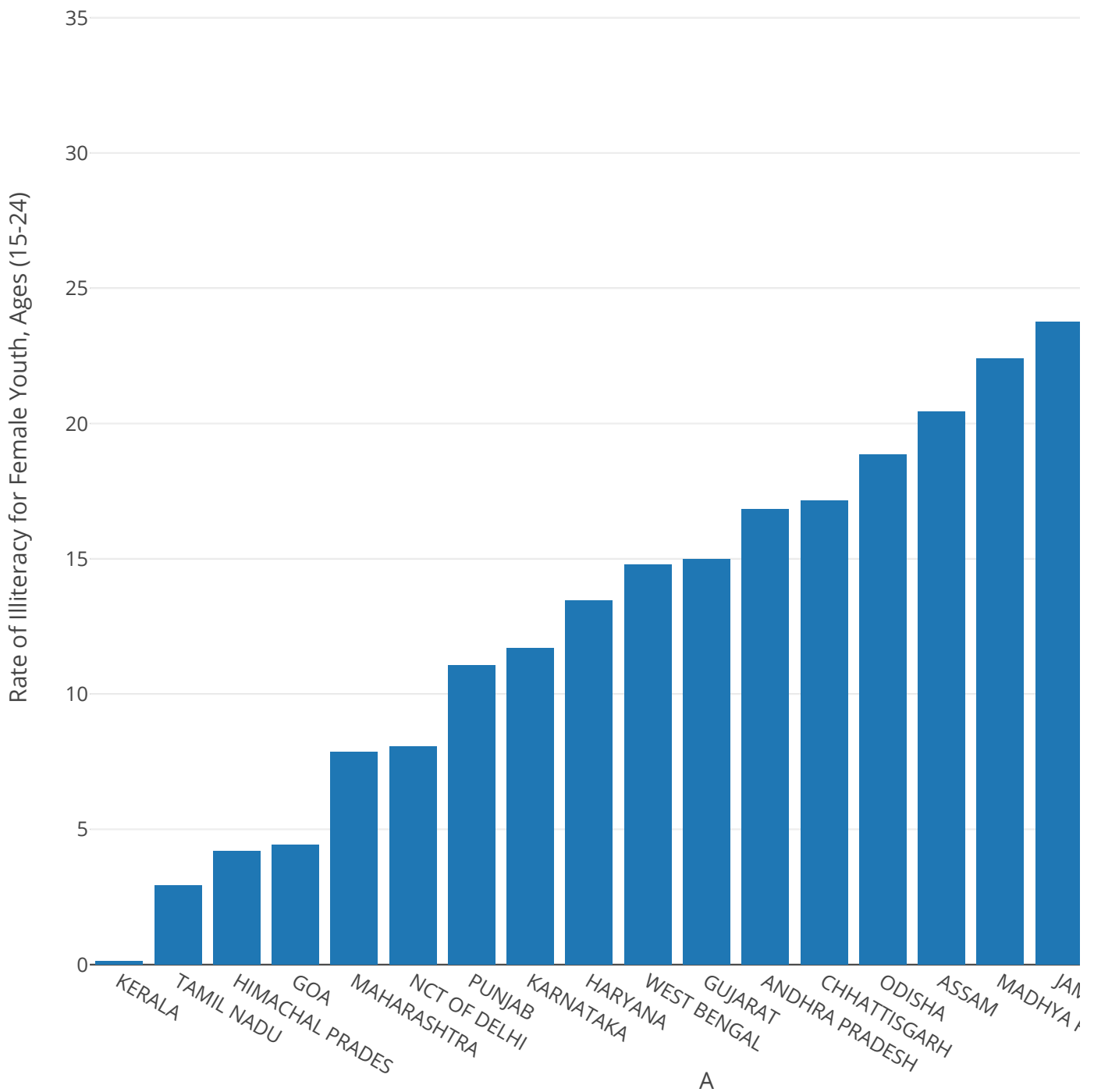
is often their only similarity. There are stark differences between Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan – the social development indices of which are worse than those of sub-Saharan African countries – and states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu that have these very indices comparable to **OECD countries**. Unfortunately, our focus on the country as a unit obscures these differences and limits our understanding of how development has taken place in India.

Consider a parameter as important as female youth literacy. It measures the literacy rate of girls and young women between the ages 15-24. It is important for obvious reasons: these young women must have been in school in the last decade and they are entering the reproductive phase of their lives. In Bihar, female youth literacy levels are at 64%. That is, about 36% of all young women in the age group 15-24 are illiterate in Bihar. In Rajasthan, 28% of women of that age group are illiterate. In Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, 24% of young women are illiterate. These numbers are comparable to countries like Malawi and Tanzania.

It is one thing if the older population is illiterate; no government can have that much of an impact on adult illiteracy. But these are children who should have been in school in the recent past. As a point of comparison, the

female youth literacy rates of Kerala and Tamil Nadu are 99% and 97% respectively. Or, conversely, less than 1% of Kerala's female youth population is illiterate, and less than 3% of Tamil Nadu's. This story repeats itself in infant mortality rates, maternal mortality rates, enrollment ratios and most other social development indices across these states.

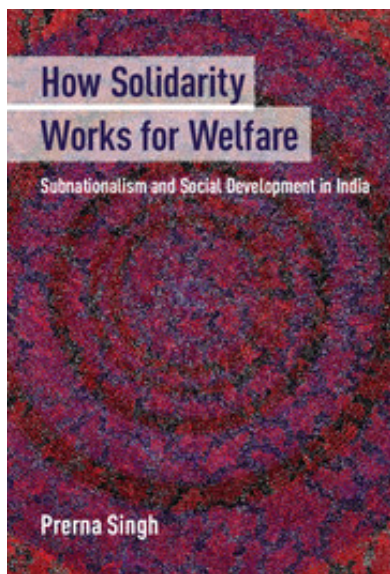
## Female Youth (15-24) Illiteracy Rate, by State



The huge disparity between states in the same country should make us ask: why are some states doing so much better than others? Or, conversely, why are some states doing so poorly? They operate in the same political and legal systems, have the same institutions and had similar

starting points. What could explain this divergence?

Prerna Singh, in her book *How Solidarity Works for Welfare: Subnationalism and Social Development in India*, looks at this question from an entirely new and refreshing perspective. She suggests that subnationalism is a possible cause for achieving greater development. The book looks at the historical rise of subnationalism in various states since the late 19th century and the corresponding improvement in their respective social development indices. The most important and possibly unique aspect of this analysis is the blending of a chronological documentation of subnationalism and its quantification – this has allowed the author to study the effect of subnationalism on development parameters.



Prerna Singh  
*How Solidarity Works for Welfare: Subnationalism and Social Development in India*  
Cambridge University Press, 2015

Kerala is a fascinating study. The state is now a leader in almost every parameter. Its social development indices are comparable to Western Europe. In the late 19th century when a large part of it was the princely state of Travancore, it had one of the worst records in social development. Travancore was constantly under threat of being annexed by the Madras presidency for its poor performance. It had a very rigid caste system and the state was not very responsive to the state's population at large. Its elite

were Brahmins who were not originally from the state, causing further complications. The footnotes Singh

provides are carefully built upon to inform us and throw significant light on the larger narrative. One of them tells us that there was no construct of a Malayali identity then; in fact, until the 1870s, only people of the Nair caste were referred to as Malayalis.

Late in the 19th century and early 20th century, the Aikya Kerala movement began as a protest against the dominant influence of Brahmins who were not from the state. Singh traces what started as a demand for representation by the native population in jobs among elites morphing into a strong movement that created a sense of Malayali identity. For the first time, Singh points out, Kerala was imagined as a single state; a state for the Malayali people. Until then the people of Travancore, Cochin and what's now northern Kerala did not think of themselves as one Malayali people. This subnationalism, Singh argues, transformed the way the population sought public services. The identity markers of caste, religion and other sub-groups became secondary to the primary marker of a linguistic group. The investments in education in the 1910s shot up in Kerala for the first time in recorded history. From 1920 to 1947, Travancore spent about 20% its total expenditure on education. But even as late as the 1950s, Kerala was thought of as administratively weak and backwards. Nehru's advisors warned him the state would not progress. The results of the past 70 years though, tell a different story.

Tamil Nadu had a trajectory that is similar to Kerala's, except it was delayed by some 20 years. The non-Brahmin movement and the Justice Party have an analogous origin story to the Aikya Kerala movement. Their petitioning against the Brahmin representation in positions of power in the colonial administration started among the non-Brahmin elites. The percolation of this

into the masses, however, was relatively swift. In a couple of decades, the emergence of Dravidian movement from the Justice Party championed the Tamil cause that transcended caste by some measures. This, Singh argues, proved to be the most critical reason for the transformation of Tamil Nadu. It helped increase the state's emphasis on health, education and general welfare of the Tamil people. A feeling of "my state" among the people of a state with respect to their linguistic in-group seems to make that state view public goods, such as health and education, as something that's beyond a zero-sum game between competing communities.

In Kerala and Tamil Nadu, subnationalism in the post-independence era partly swapped out Brahmins for New Delhi for their out-group. Further, as Singh argues, the elite who started these subnationalism movements for their own sake seem to evolve into a position of having an even greater stake in improving conditions for the masses. Subnationalism transforms the identity of the most downtrodden sections of society in the minds of the elite as "our people." The evidence that Singh cites to support her case are editorials from *Malayala Manorama* in the 1890s. Their call for the education of untouchables is impactful and eye-opening.

The contrast with Uttar Pradesh in terms of the absolute absence of subnationalism from its politics is striking. That the state simply could not come up with a name for itself and instead settled on the generic Uttar Pradesh retaining the shortened version UP, is illuminating. This short form had earlier stood for United Provinces, a name the British had used. The linguistic struggle in Uttar Pradesh was not to establish an identity for people across the state was the case in Tamil Nadu or Kerala. Instead, it

was a struggle between Hindi and Urdu, which was a proxy for conflict between Hindus and Muslims.

The fact that Uttar Pradesh, then the United Provinces, was one of the better-administered provinces in British India is a reminder that its status as a laggard state is a recent one. The absolute absence of an identity at the state level, Singh argues, has resulted in most government programs being seen as preferential treatments to some groups. This continues to the present day when governments of Mayawati are seen to provide Dalits with special assistance while SP governments are seen to provide Yadavs with advantages. In Tamil Nadu and Kerala, by contrast, most government services are universal in nature and are seen as such.



Prerna Singh. Credit: [prernasingh.net](http://prernasingh.net)

Rajasthan and Bihar are the two other states Prerna Singh considers in some detail. These two fall somewhere between the two extremes discussed. Rajasthan had a Rajput elite against whom there has been some consolidation in the late 20th century. Similarly, there has been a slow movement towards an identification with Rajasthan and not the erstwhile princely states that made

up the state. These small factors have added up and correlate with greater spending on education in Rajasthan in recent times. However, the deep feudal background and the place of Rajputs has not been fully overcome.

Similarly, Bihar under Nitish Kumar, has made some strides towards subnationalism. But those are far too little and too late. It would be interesting to watch these two states if and how they pull away from Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in terms of social development.

To quantitatively support her theory, Prerna Singh uses an interesting technique. A seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) that she runs reveals that subnationalism has a positive impact on social spending in general. States with greater degrees of subnationalism have a greater portion of their expenditure directed towards health and education. Further, subnationalism seems to correlate to lower infant mortality rate and other health outcomes. The regression technique, used cleverly and carefully, separates out chronology into 5 year time intervals to track this. The one criticism that a very interested reader may have about this book though is that the data with which Singh performed the analysis is not available for recreating the results. The reader is also left wanting more discussion in greater detail on the mathematical model adopted.

This use of subnationalism as it relates to welfare is new and interesting for several reasons. It punctures the nationalist argument of 'India first' that has gained currency recently. If anything, we now have evidence to explicitly suggest this approach is likely to make any given state significantly worse off. The BJP, which has at times been the most vocal proponent of a nationalistic approach, is strong exactly in those states where there's no strong linguistic identity and there's an absence of

subnationalism. Those are also the states that lag behind in social development. It makes one wonder about the cause and effect relationship between the politics and development. The other aspect this book helps us understand is why Dalit parties don't do well in states with a high degree of subnationalism. In both Kerala and Tamil Nadu, they are minor players, for instance. Perhaps this can be explained by subnationalism tapering over the fissures of Dalit identity at the ballot box. The political rhetoric of Dalit parties in Tamil Nadu, for example, are often indistinguishable from the Dravidian rhetoric of Tamil nationalism.

The implications for policy from this book are many. The most important of them is that the central government should not involve itself in the daily administrative business of a state. Or formulate national level policy for local problems. For instance, the idea of a national 'Swach Bharat' campaign is bound to fail if we view it through this prism. The empirical evidence of subnationalism also suggests a relaxed attitude to nationalism may help improve the lives of people while a homogenous idea and an aggressive approach may only make for a more illiterate and unhealthy society. Allowing for greater association with units of linguistic and regional diversity with lower association with nationalism may end up achieving greater cohesion, counter-intuitively. India viewed thus is a useful coming together of states rather than a nation state with constituent non-negotiable parts. In terms of electoral politics, it would have been a useful data point had the National Front or United Front governments lasted longer than they did. Perhaps their approach to nationalism would have been more relaxed than either national party and thus would have allowed for better outcomes in social

development.

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