

# Gender and Indian Literary Awards

## What Do the Numbers Say?

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The distribution of Sahitya Akademi awards shows the fairly predictable pattern of gender gaps. Starting from 1955, and across two dozen languages, less than one-tenth of all awards have gone to women. However, since the 1990s, there has been an overall increase in the awards given to women writers.

The authors wish to thank Jyothsna Belliappa, Sreeparna Chattopadhyay, Pratibha Nandakumar, and K S Madhusudan for comments on an early draft as also Bhagya at the Karnataka Sahitya Academy for providing data on state awards for literature.

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Literary “merit,” like merit in other cultural pursuits, is not only a matter of the intrinsic value of literary texts, but also a result of historical and sociological attribution of value conferred by structures of power. Patronage by the state has traditionally been important in the production and recognition of literary “classics.” The modern Indian state has been an important source of patronage for literary pursuits, in particular, through the setting up of the Sahitya Akademi in 1954 as the apex, national institution for preserving, producing and promoting Indian literatures. Since 1955, the Akademi has conferred annual awards on the “best” literary works in several languages across four regional zones (12 languages in 1955, 16 in 1960, 22 in 1977, and 24 from 2005 onwards). While there are several other awards and honours, such as the Saraswati Samman and the Crossword Book Award, for Indian writers floated by non-government groups, the Sahitya Akademi Award, is arguably the most important, given its longevity, wide reach, and social prestige.

Given the hold of patriarchal power structures, it is common knowledge that literary production by women has not

received the recognition it deserves. We explore the distribution of the Sahitya Akademi awards across male and female writers. A key question is: Has the Akademi dealt with male and female writers with an even hand? This exploratory study maps and occasionally speculates on the pattern of distribution of Akademi awards using a descriptive statistical approach. While we are aware that there is no surprise value to our finding that there is, in fact, a huge overall gender gap, we find that the gender gap varies in interesting and non-obvious ways based on the specifics of context (time, language, region, and social group). We find that a careful juxtaposition of specific aspects of the gender gap produces several interesting empirical puzzles that can spur the construction of deeper explanations. Rather than developing such explanations, we limit ourselves to presenting some puzzles and offering a few tentative possibilities that we hope may be taken forward by others interested in issues of gender justice.

We also briefly explore how literary awards work at the state level. Can we expect a replay of the patterns and trends of the national Akademi awards therein? While the Sahitya Akademi’s motto is to nurture “Indian literature” as a whole, how do awards play out in specific Indian literatures, such as Odiya, Kannada, and Dogri, with their particular social, historical, and political configurations as well as unique literary establishments? For example, does caste play a more important role in conferring literary distinction in a state driven by the compulsions of caste politics than it

might at the national level? Given our familiarity with the “ground” realities of Kannada literary culture, we decided to focus on awards of the Karnataka Sahitya Academy. We expect this comparison to illuminate the emerging picture in interesting ways, enabling us to comment on the similarities and differences between the awards at the national and state levels.

### What Does the Data Say?

In the 22 languages we consider,<sup>1</sup> there have been 1,129 national Sahitya Akademi awards to date (1955–2016). Of these, a mere 8.1% have gone to women. We note here that this low figure is consistent with those of other awards. The figure for the Jnanpith Award, for instance, is not much better (13%). Similarly, only 12% of Nobel laureates in literature have been women, and in the case of France’s prestigious Prix Goncourt award, there have been only 11 female awardees as opposed to 102 male awardees (Horn 2015).

As we explored the data, we realised that we could not treat gender as an autonomous category of analysis, inflected as it is by several other identities such as caste, region and language.<sup>2</sup> Hence, our gender analysis is nested within an intersectional frame. The following is a synoptic presentation of key descriptive findings:

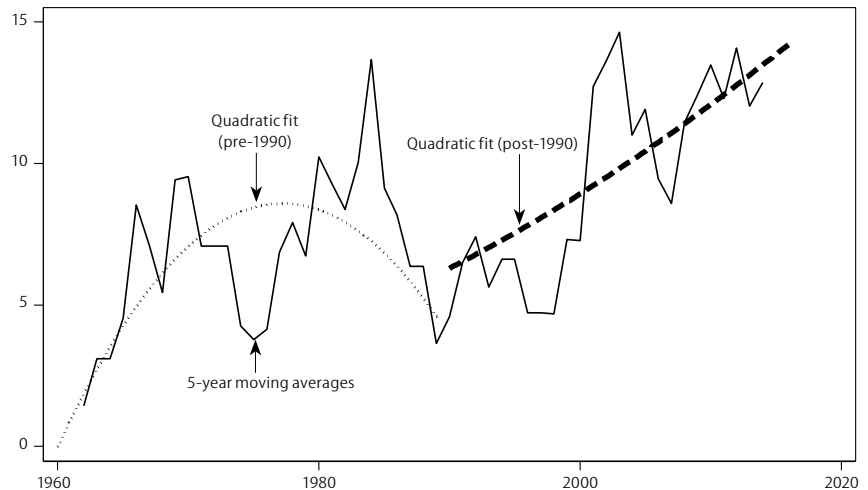
(i) Although the overall figure for women awardees is very low (8%), it is heartening that the same has gone up in recent years, with the upward trend beginning in the 1990s.

(ii) There have been far more female awardees in some languages (for instance, English [25%]) than others (such as Sanskrit [nil]).

(iii) Most languages have regional bases (barring some like English and Sanskrit), and it turns out that the languages spoken predominantly in India’s northern and western regions have fewer women awardees than languages spoken in India’s southern and particularly eastern regions.

(iv) Changes in the proportion of awards being given to women are connected to caste/group dynamics in complex ways: for instance, in the specific case of Karnataka, the overall increase in female awardees from the 1990s is driven largely

**Figure 1: Women Awardees (%), by Year (All Languages)**



Source: Data from the Sahitya Akademi website (gender coding by authors). The graph presents percentage of women among all awardees in a year. The solid line shows five-year moving averages and the dotted lines are quadratic fits for the 1960–89 and 1990–2016 periods.

by women from the Dalit, Other Backward Classes, and Brahmin communities rather than women from other populous social groups.

We now proceed to unpack the low overall figure (of 8%) along the dimensions of time, language, region and social group, thereby providing some nuance. These descriptive findings call for a deeper study in order to construct valid explanations, and future work can hopefully build more systematically on our exploratory presentation below.

### Slow Upswing from Early 1990s

Between 1955 and 2016—that is, for 62 years of annual awards in upwards of 15 languages—there were no awards given to women in 18 years (that is, almost a third of the time period). However, there has been an encouraging change over time, with 1990 as an approximate break point: while women received 6.2% of the awards prior to 1990, they got 10% of the awards after 1990—an increase by almost two-thirds. Before 1990, each step forward in women’s representation in the awards was accompanied by half a step backwards soon thereafter (so that the overall gains tended to be limited). But, from the 1990s onwards, there were fewer backward steps, producing a relatively steady increase overall (Figure 1).

The natural break in the pattern of awards around 1990 possibly reflects a growing sense of identity and awareness of rights on the part of previously

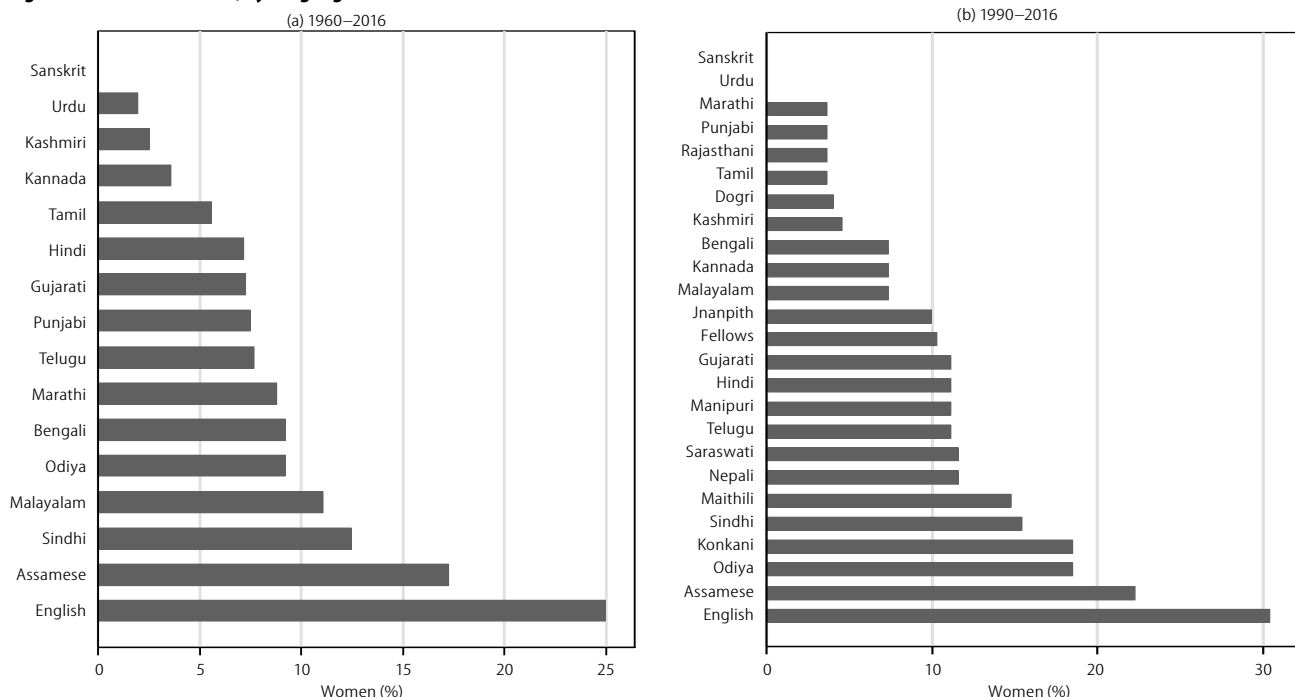
marginalised communities who found a stronger voice in the post-Emergency period. For instance, the Dalit and social protest movements in Karnataka enabled several first-generation writers to give expression to their life experiences for the first time in literature, possibly spurring a greater social awareness about gender parity. The post-1990 period is also one when global capital flows were heightened in India, strengthening the English-educated, professional classes who were already exposed to Western liberal ideology.

Interestingly, the 10% figure for women awardees in the post-1990 period is very similar to other prestigious Indian literary awards. Post-1990, women’s representation was 10% in Sahitya Akademi

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**Figure 2: Women Awardees, by Language**

Source: Same as Figure 1.

fellowships, 10% in Jnanpith awardees, and 11.5% in Saraswati Samman awardees (Figure 2b). That these figures continue to be low in absolute terms is underlined by the fact that the Akademi website does not even bother to be politically correct with the pronouns it uses: “the highest honour conferred by the Akademi on a writer is by electing him as its fellow” (Sahitya Akademi 2018).

### Large Variations in Languages

There is a considerable variation in the number of women awardees across languages. Figure 2a shows the 16 languages in which awards were instituted by 1960 and Figure 2b shows the 22 languages for which awards have been active since the 1990s. The variation is bookended by English (25% women awardees since 1960) and Sanskrit (zero), with Urdu being close to Sanskrit as its only woman awardee was the exceptional Qurratulain Hyder (1967). In Figure 2a, besides English, only three other languages attain even 10% representation: Assamese, Sindhi and Malayalam.

How do we understand the relatively large figure (25%) in the English category? While other Indian languages are limited to one state (such as Malayalam in Kerala) or a few states (such as in the

case of Hindi), English is distributed across several metropolitan and other spaces throughout the country. Also, while most upper-caste men tended to go in for careers in science and engineering, upper-caste women took up the study of social sciences and humanities, especially English literary studies. English education, in general, provided a more liberated space for women, along with the advantages that come with the class it represents, inculcating the courage, confidence, and exposure which enabled the possibility of writing. English also became the window to other imaginaries for women’s lives making them aware of other modes of living and writing, genres, ideas and opportunities, not to speak of the social churning in women’s lives in the post-independence nation.

That Sanskrit has yet to have a woman awardee—in 62 years—is perhaps no surprise, considering how knowledge and scholarship of Sanskrit has traditionally been confined to the male sphere. What about Urdu, which also has a very low score? The language is associated with—although by no means confined to—parts of the Muslim population. As there is a strong correlation between class privilege and access to education, literary writing has bypassed large sections

of Urdu speakers.<sup>3</sup> The hold of madrasa education<sup>4</sup> may also have kept Urdu speakers tethered to the older order which was less supportive of women. Note, however, that large populations of Indian Muslims function in languages other than Urdu. Muslims in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Bengal speak Malayalam, Tamil and Bangla respectively—and use these languages to write as well. While a majority of Muslims in Karnataka speak Urdu as their mother tongue (Abbi et al 2004),<sup>5</sup> many of Karnataka’s Muslim writers have chosen Kannada as a medium of literary expression.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the quantum of output by women writing in Urdu is quite limited.

Having established that there is an overall increase in the percentage of women awardees from the 1990s (Figure 1) and that languages vary in the percentage of female awardees (Figure 2), we now ask whether there is variation across languages in the pre/post-1990s trend. That is, how do specific languages differ from the overall national trend (of increase in women awardees from the 1990s)? Keeping aside Sanskrit and Urdu where there is little women’s representation throughout, of the remaining 14 languages which had awards from 1960, five languages with proud literary traditions—

Marathi, Punjabi, Malayalam, Tamil and Bengali—saw a decline in women's representation in the post-1990 period. Is it possible that women writers in these languages, who had to largely contend with only upper-caste/middle-class male writers in the earlier decades, had to share recognition in the later decades with large sections of first-generation male writers from other castes and classes who felt empowered to write because of access to education and a more conducive cultural politics that nourished their writing? If so, then what explains the case of languages such as Odiya, where the percentage of women awardees increased from 0% before 1990 to almost 20% post-1990?

### Regional Variations

Are there differences in the number of women awardees among specific regions/zones?<sup>7</sup> To explore this, we focus on the post-1990 period (Figure 2b) and use four broad Indian regions: north, west, south and east. In the five northern languages (Punjabi, Rajasthani, Dogri, Kashmiri and Hindi) on an average women constituted only 5.4% of the awardees. The two

western languages (Marathi and Gujarati) do marginally better with 7.4% women. The five southern languages (Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu and Konkani) do a little better, averaging 9.6%. The six eastern languages (Assamese, Odiya, Maithili, Nepali, Manipuri and Bengali) together do the best, averaging 14.3%. What explains this variation across broad regions? Can ideas of spatial difference in women's autonomy—some have argued that women's autonomy is more, and gender inequality generally less in the east and south compared to the west and north (for instance, Dyson and Moore 1983)—explain these findings?

### Social Group Dimensions

Since social groups have region-specific dynamics that cannot be generalised across space, we focus on Karnataka, a state that we are more familiar with. Out of 62 national Sahitya Akademi awards for Kannada, only two have gone to women, of whom one was Dalit and the other Brahmin. To explore the intersectionality of gender with other social markers, we turn to the state awards (Karnataka Sahitya Academy awards).

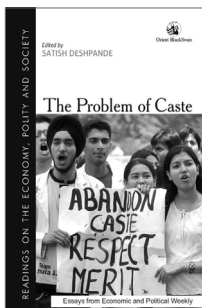
When comparing the national and state literary awards for Kannada from the 1970s onwards, we find that while there have only been two national awards for women (equivalent to about 4%), about 15% of state awards have gone to women.<sup>8</sup>

Why have women done better at the state-level than at the national-level awards?<sup>9</sup> A careful answer to this question will have to call upon several factors. Karnataka was an early adopter of affirmative action policies that arguably created a greater awareness around issues of social justice in the public sphere. This was further bolstered by the *Bandaya Chaluvali* (protest movement) in the 1970s which brought together different marginalised groups, creating a major upheaval in the literary world.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, an implicit quota system evolved to address these pressures in the distribution of awards. For instance, it is an unspoken rule that awards should be given to cover important categories such as women, Dalits, and Muslims. Further, there is the issue of regional representation—awards to be given to geographical/cultural regions within the state (north Karnataka, south Canara, Mysuru–Bengaluru belt,

## The Problem of Caste

Edited by

**SATISH DESHPANDE**



Pp xi + 425 Rs 595  
ISBN 978-81-250-5501-3  
2014

Caste is one of the oldest concerns of the social sciences in India that continues to be relevant even today.

The general perception about caste is that it was an outdated concept until it was revived by colonial policies and promoted by vested interests and electoral politics after independence. This hegemonic perception changed irrevocably in the 1990s after the controversial reservations for the Other Backward Classes recommended by the Mandal Commission, revealing it to be a belief of only a privileged upper caste minority – for the vast majority of Indians caste continued to be a crucial determinant of life opportunities.

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