

Within the Edifice of Development: Education of Women in India

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The realization of the country's aspirations involves change in the knowledge, skills, interests and values of the people as a whole. This is basic to every programme of social and economic betterment of which India stands in need ... If this 'change on a grand scale' is to be achieved without violent revolution (and even for that it would be necessary) there is one instrument, and one instrument only, that can be used: Education. (Education and National Development: Report of the Indian Education Commission)

Andhra Pradesh's development goals cannot be achieved without harnessing the potential of its women. (Government of Andhra Pradesh 1999)

Of the various orthodoxies that prevail in gender and development thinking, that of the importance of education has remained unexamined. It is an unquestioned truth that the educational status of the population in general, and more specifically of women, is an important indicator of development. The term "education" carries with it a notion of progress and empowerment which is so taken for granted, that interrogation of the term, its content and the implications of its easy and widespread acceptance, becomes barely even possible. In this present moment in India where the focus, as in several other countries, is on gender and development, education of the girl child and of women is regarded as key in alleviating existing problems and in ensuring socio-economic growth. But it is precisely this rich promise which necessitates an interrogation of the discursive production of education as the panacea for a whole range of problems. Central government, state governments, some landmark judgements of recent times, non-governmental organisations (NGOs),

the World Bank and business interests all endorse the importance of primary education, that too of the girl child.

With the overwhelming consensus in current development discourse on the need to provide universal primary education, with special focus on the girl child, "education" has come to carry very different meanings, marking a radical departure from the past. But what does this consensus actually consist of and what has "education" come to mean within it? What is the link between "education" and "development"? How far has the situation on the ground justified the faith placed upon it in discourses of development? What difference has it really made to the lives of the women development agencies seek to reach?

This article makes an effort at outlining approaches to the education of women in India that have been taken over time, in order to better grasp what today's policy decisions on education mean. The article focuses on four different moments that have shaped pervasive thinking in relation to the education of women in India. The moments chosen for discussion are:

1. The debates on women's education in the nineteenth century reform period in Indian history.
2. The approach towards education outlined in the *Towards Equality* report prepared in 1974 by the Committee on the Status of Women in India.
3. The anti-*arrack* movement triggered by literacy programmes in Andhra Pradesh in 1992.
4. Recent policies in relation to education of women.

A reading of the shifts and manoeuvres over these four moments presents some striking observations. First, it emerges that following the

high visibility of the question of women's education in the social reform period, it dropped out completely from public discourse only to resurface much later in an intermittent manner. Also, there are significant differences between the earlier reform moment and the present one. While the reform movement shaped the identity of the upper caste woman, it is now the lower caste/class woman who is the subject of the developmental discourse and the seeming beneficiary of the state's attention. These differences in fact serve to draw our attention to some of the contentious issues in the contemporary context. It helps us ask what characterises the present moment and what are the agendas involved? Why have educational programmes not lived up to their promise of genuinely empowering women, despite the massive supports provided by the government? How can the situation be changed so that education has a more meaningful role when thinking about gender and development rather than being a mere statistical indicator?

1 Women's education during the reform movement

The social reform movement of nineteenth-century India accorded critical importance to educating women. Education for women was understood in terms of producing mothers who could nurture their children, sons in particular, as the future nation builders. Several proponents of education also argued that educated women would be better companionate mates. This was in keeping with a time in which men were being influenced by Western education and notions of companionate love and marriage. These structures of feeling were sought to be grafted on to the Indian situation. The process of selection of elements from the West and of naming certain aspects as "traditional" and "Indian" ensured the articulation of an enduring conception of Indian tradition, modernity and the nation which continues to be influential even today.

The reform movement was concerned mainly with the upper caste woman. The conscious effort brought to the task is evident for instance when the reformist Koylaschander Bose maintained, in a piece titled 'On the Education of Hindu Females' written in 1846 (cited in Sangari and Vaid 1989), that all efforts must be made to refine and recast the Hindu woman. An exception to the large-scale engagement with questions of educating the upper caste woman,

were the efforts made by Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule in Maharashtra to educate women from lower caste families. Some missionary schools too provided education to lower caste women. However, it was the mode of educating upper caste women that became hegemonic.

Given the realisation that women's education was fraught with the danger of upsetting familial relationships, the *content of education* was debated at great length in order to prevent such an eventuality. Unlike in the present moment, where there is a taken-for-granted attitude about education and its contents, during the nineteenth century commentaries upon education could not be separated from deliberation upon the content of education. Several tracts detailing what should be included or excluded from the curriculum can be found in this period. However, as different scholars have argued in relation to the reform period, whether it was the question of *sati* (widow remarriage) or fixing the age of consent for marriages, or education, it was 'no wonder that even reading against the grain of a discourse ostensibly about women, one learns so little about them ... neither subject, nor object, but ground—such is the status of women ...' (Mani 1989). So too, in relation to matters of education, the importance of educating women was emphasised because it was regarded as being important for the task of nation building and for striking a balance between the need to modernise while maintaining a certain consensual reformist notion of the Indian tradition. The reformist leaders thought it important to concentrate on the content of education received by women because of their fears that if education was not moderated and modulated to the Indian context, it would have the undesired effect of making the Indian women like their Western counterparts.

2 The Towards Equality report

It was not until the feminist moment of the 1970s in India that the discussion of a range of issues (including education) began to *centre* on women. The explosive and incisive commentaries made in the *Towards Equality* report on the status of women in India is among the earliest of such documents. The *Towards Equality* report of 1974 prepared at the behest of the Government of India is a historic instance of the coming together of both the feminist and developmental approach. The tone of *Towards Equality* in taking up the subject of women is important in this context. The report regards the

provisions emphasised in the Constitution of India as significant and takes them as the reference for its critique of the situation on the ground as well as in suggesting recommendations. It is interesting to note at this point that in relation to the belief in the transformative powers of education, there is a broad convergence between feminism and the proponents of development, leading in fact to a development discourse inflected by feminism. For instance, in its section on education, the report states unequivocally that 'illiteracy remains the greatest barrier to any improvement in the position of women – in employment, health, the enjoyment and exercise of legal and constitutional rights, equal opportunity in education and generally in attaining the equality of status that our Constitution has declared as the goal of the nation' (Government of India 1974: 264).

Another equally important point to be noted about the report is that it is marked by a concern about women's situation and the desire to improve their lives. Moreover, the report was overwhelmingly about the plight of the lower class women. The *Towards Equality* report thus had the effect of decisively shifting attention away from the upper caste/middle class woman to the woman from the lower class. A critical thrust of developmental measures was thus spelt out. In relation to education, the report emphasises how education will benefit women. According to the report:

The only institution which can counteract the effect of this process [of discriminating against women] is the educational system. If education is to promote equality for women, it must make a deliberate, planned and sustained effort so that the new value of equality of the sexes, can replace the traditional value system of inequality. The educational system today has not even attempted to undertake this responsibility. In fact, the schools reflect and strengthen the traditional prejudices of inequality through their curricula, the classification of subjects on the basis of sex and the unwritten code of conduct enforced on their pupils. (Government of India 1974: 282)

The concern manifested in the *Towards Equality* report is in sharp contrast with the latter day recommendations of the World Bank where benefits for women are regarded either as a fringe bonus to the main goal of developing the economy or more

critically as feeding into the agenda of developing the economy.

There are, however, commonalities between the *Towards Equality* report and government documents produced in recent times: the importance given to the correlation between increased education and decreased fertility. According to the *Towards Equality* report, 'A review of some of the latest studies of differential fertility carried out in different parts of India indicates that generally the level of education and fertility are inversely related ... The National Sample Survey indicated that at each higher level of education fertility performance is lower' (Government of India 1974: 30).

This particular justification for educating women continues today and has influenced the funding policies of the state governments as well as the World Bank. In an article rather appropriately titled 'Schooling as contraception...', Roger Jeffery and Alaka Basu (1996) interrogate the mainstream perception that emphasises the link between schooling and fertility. According to them:

There are variations between countries in the minimum amount of schooling required before the statistical effect on fertility is noticeable; several ... [studies] see primary schooling alone as inadequate in South Asia, with the magical effect not appearing until women have experienced secondary schooling. Further, several studies have shown that women with a few years of schooling have higher fertility, but this is rapidly reversed over time as more women have some schooling and as the levels of schooling rise. (Jeffery and Basu 1996: 15)

In relation to the education of women, the attempt has been to look for quantifiable gains, whether it is in terms of productivity or fertility. It took the anti-*arrack* agitation in Nellore to foreground the other possibilities that education programmes opened up, as well as the problematic aspects associated with them.

3 The anti-*arrack* movement

The unprecedented mobilisation of women in the Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh in 1992 is in many ways symptomatic of what was to emerge as some of the problematic aspects of the way in which education and literacy for women were articulated in India. The campaign taken up by these women

against the state-sponsored sale of *arrack* (country liquor) was attributed to the literacy programmes sponsored by the central government's National Literacy Mission (NLM). The NLM literacy programme was introduced into the district with a lot of fanfare and the commitment of numerous volunteers – 55,000 by one estimate. About six months into the programme, women organised themselves to stop the sale of liquor. They began in their villages, then began to address the auctioning of liquor licences itself. The women who formed the movement were inspired by a lesson titled '*Seethamma Katha*' in their literacy primers. This lesson narrated the story of a woman in a village who committed suicide because she was not able to reform her drunkard husband. Discussions around this lesson and the fact that the details of the lesson were very close to the women's lives triggered off the movement. Women united themselves on the issue and closed *arrack* shops in the village. They travelled long distances to stop auctions.

Even as the protest became a point of discussion for the entire nation, a newly formed government in Andhra Pradesh prohibited sale of *arrack* as well as all forms of liquor. Ignoring all the related demands made by the women regarding the sale of affordable rice, availability of drinking water and transport facilities, the government announced the *Podupu Lakshmi* scheme.¹ This resulted in the women involved in the campaign being brought under different self-help groups (SHGs), which focused on thrift and credit (see Batliwala and Dhanraj, this *IDS Bulletin*). The onus was once again on the women themselves to improve their lives. The energy and the charge that the movement had managed to throw up was thus dissipated by the government.

For the National Literacy Mission, the programme at Nellore was regarded as having had only partial success. Sadhana Saxena points out 'The Nellore TLC [Total Literacy Campaign] was evaluated ... by a team of external evaluators from Hyderabad University and their findings reveal that Nellore district's achievements are of C grade, the literacy rate achieved is 34 per cent' (Saxena 2002: 84). It is important here to consider definitions of literacy and education other than those used by NLM for their evaluation. Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen have been working towards expanding the present understanding of education, especially within discussions of developmental agendas.

Among the five roles that Drèze and Sen assign to education and health, they cite 'empowerment and distributive roles'. According to them:

Greater literacy and educational achievements of disadvantaged groups can increase their ability to resist oppression, to organise politically, and to get a fairer deal. The redistributive effects can be important not only between different social groups or households, but also *within* the family, since there is evidence that better education contributes to the reduction of gender-based inequalities. (Drèze and Sen 1995: 15)

The Nellore campaign bears out this argument. It is ironic therefore that the National Literacy Mission, which was instrumental in bringing about the movement, should regard the literacy programme as a failure of sorts.

Sadhana Saxena points to the obvious disjuncture between what the women wanted and the agenda of the implementers of the programme. 'During our visit to Nellore district, BGVS leaders told us that although the anti-*arrack* agitation was a spontaneous movement which touched upon a burning issue for the people, however due to this post-literacy work had suffered enormously. *Obviously, it was the major agenda for the BGVS but not for the struggling women*' (Saxena 2002: 84, emphasis added). The chasm between what women want and what policy-makers affirm is evident also in the 1997 World Bank report on funding for education (World Bank 1997). The report negates the connection between literacy programmes and empowerment of women when it concludes that the loss of revenue from the sale of alcohol has adversely affected investments in education.

The formation of self-help groups by the government of Andhra Pradesh after the campaign had died down had the effect of transforming a political issue into a purely economic one. Whereas the women were arguing that the government was responsible for their condition, the state in turn was converting them into economic agents. The struggle taken up by the women was primarily to put an end to the domestic violence they faced from their drunken husbands. Instead of targeting their husbands, they were targeting the structural roots of the problem. They held the state responsible for encouraging the consumption of *arrack* in order to increase its revenues. Through their struggle, the

women of Nellore gave substance to the feminist slogan, 'the personal is political'. But in their totally depoliticised role these groups now work for corporate groups in Andhra Pradesh. They sell the products of various multinational corporations which have found the access and effective network of the SHGs a convenient means of expanding their market. Also, the fact that the SHGs (which were formerly literacy groups) are being utilised by companies with goods to sell is no happenchance. In fact the government of Andhra Pradesh, through deliberate policy measures, has shaped the field of education so that it is more closely aligned with the realm of economic activities.

4 The present moment

If, during the nineteenth century reform period, the task of nation building provided the justification for educating women, it is economic considerations that shape the field of education today. Ironically, policy decisions taken up at this point are also being made in the name of "reforms". For instance, in Andhra Pradesh, which is billed as the most development conscious state in the country, a commitment to education is asserted in its official document *Andhra Pradesh – Vision 2020*, published in 1999.²

Education is, consistently and from the beginning, held up as an important aspect of the Andhra Pradesh Economic Restructuring Programme (APERP) outlined in the *Vision 2020* document. That education should figure as part of an *economic* programme is an extremely significant feature of this moment. In fact, this aspect is emphasised anew when the chapter 'The Agenda for Education' in *Vision 2020* opens with the statement: 'Education has a critical role to play in development. Recognising this, Andhra Pradesh firmly believes that outlays on education are an investment and not an expenditure' (Government of Andhra Pradesh 1999: 73). That this thinking is not unique to Andhra Pradesh, but part of a growing common-sense is evident from the 2001 *Report of the Steering Committee on Elementary and Adult Education for the Tenth Five Year Plan*. The report also emphasises that effective population control and greater economic productivity provide the justification for focusing on literacy and the education of women (Government of India 2001).

While these documents do not directly mention it, the tone and the nature of the concern (regarding

population control for instance) clearly indicate that the woman that is being discussed is lower class. It is this woman who needs to be made literate. It is also taken as a given that it is this same woman who needs to be "empowered". It is important here to note that the thinking within the field of development that seeks to empower poor women on the one hand, and the rationale within the field of hard core economics on the other, seem to have found points of convergence in the present time. As Vasavi and Kingfisher point out in their article titled 'Poor women as economic agents':

Neo-liberal economics enables states to problematise and appropriate the work capabilities of women in an effort to reorder and redirect their own political and economic agendas. Yet the legitimizing bases of such problematisation and appropriation are conducted in a language and context in which the social status and economic position of women itself are sought to be 'improved'. (Vasavi and Kingfisher 2003: 3)

Poor women are thus regarded as critical agents in furthering certain kinds of economic agendas because they are increasingly regarded as pliable and reliable workers. Furthermore, education is seen as helping shape them into better workers.

That policies in relation to education are not addressed to middle or upper class women is clear from the fact that the two-tier system of the formal and non-formal educational systems are allowed to flourish. There is no policy whatsoever that acknowledges the hierarchies that this system propagates. It is by now an established reality that government educational institutions are meant for the poor, while the middle and upper classes access private schools. And in relation to higher education, there is an all-out attempt to privatise it. In such a context, it is significant that for the first time the focus is on the girl child. This factor too is unique to the present moment. The emphasis on educating the girl child has had the effect of legitimising the primacy of schooling over higher education. In fact the hype about elementary education has served to justify allocation of meagre budgets to higher education and to make the plea that it should be privatised.

The implicit argument is that while primary education is a necessity, higher education is an

indulgence and that whoever desires it should pay for it. The report on 'A policy framework for reforms in education', submitted by Mukesh Ambani and Kumaramangalam Birla to the Prime Minister's Council on Trade and Industry in April 2000, for example, recommends that the Government should focus on primary and secondary education and leave higher and professional education to the private sector. If market logic prevails and fees in institutions of higher education are increased, there are indications to show that the higher education of girls would definitely suffer. Given that the practice of dowry (or bride price) persists in spite of education of girls, paying high fees for education would be seen as adding to the burden of dowry and would result in decline in the enrolment of girls in higher education.

There is yet another aspect in relation to the education of women. This is regarding the link between education of women and their employment status. I refer here to some conclusions that have been drawn from Kerala, a state that is widely acclaimed for having 100 per cent literacy. Problematising the kind of uncritical value bestowed on education in Kerala, Praveena Kodoth argues, 'if Kerala continues to lead the country in terms of women's education (in terms of high enrolment and low drop-out rates), female work participation rates are among the lowest and declining ...' (Kodoth 2000: 2). Given the dominance of the logic of the economic, this lack of correlation should be a cause for concern. And yet, macro policies do not address these aspects, continuing instead to insist on women's education.

This raises a number of dilemmas for feminist engagement with the issue of education. For some women's groups, these are very real concerns. Yet the importance of education for women is such that they continue to insist on it. Their argument is that education is a right in itself, that education is a resource that may not be immediately used, that its use cannot be quantified. According to them, women *have* felt more confident after acquiring some level of literacy, even if it is the most minimal

kind. In the experience of these women's groups, neo-literate women have resisted being cheated and on the whole felt less vulnerable after participating in literacy programmes. Studies, for instance that of Nirantar (2003), have also shown that as a result of literacy programmes, women participate more in local governance institutions. These groups argue that the education of women is not a priority for the government. They also cite examples of several neo-literate women feeling bitter when the government abruptly stopped the literacy programmes or when no efforts were made to take up programmes for continuing education.

Literacy/education is obviously important. The contention being made here is that there is a taken-for-granted attitude about the content of education, about the mode in which it is to be delivered, and about its usefulness to different sections of the population. When education is spoken of today, discussions about the content or pedagogic practices are not regarded as being relevant. As Malini Ghosh points out, issues of access are the only ones that are held important:

... the primary focus of groups that do work on education is on access – issues such as, increasing enrolment of girls and arresting the drop out rates. The state too, responds to this lack focusing on delivery. Once women and girls have entered the 'public sphere,' it is assumed that empowerment will follow implicitly ... But the reality is that the education spaces themselves create boundaries that limit possibilities and reinforce stereotypes (Ghosh 2002: 1615).

Given these various and disturbing factors, it is imperative that greater attention is paid to what happens in the name of education. It is important to interrogate the myth that education is a good in itself and that it inevitably leads to the empowerment of women. There is also the need to target the hierarchies that are being established within the field of education, where literacy is for the poor and education is for the rich.

Notes

1. The scheme was aimed at encouraging small savings. In Telugu, the regional language, *Podupu* means savings and *Lakshmi* refers to the goddess of wealth. The *Podupu Lakshmi* scheme therefore sought to provide women access to wealth through savings from which they could then draw credit for any entrepreneurial activity they chose.
2. Following the recent elections to the State Assembly of Andhra Pradesh, a new government was sworn into power in May 2004. The priorities of the new State government are strikingly different from that of the previous government, especially in terms of the importance it is giving rural issues as against the urban focus of the previous government. Interestingly however, it is unlikely that there will be any major shift in policy decisions in

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