

**EDUCATION AND RURAL WOMEN:
TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

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I was somewhat puzzled when I was asked to present a paper on Agencies for Rural Women's Education* . The inevitable question that came to my mind was - are we planning *different* agencies for educating rural women? Is it not more essential to ask the question why educational agencies all over the world had to wait for the international women's decade to *discover* rural women, even though they constitute the majority - in terms of numbers, contribution to human survival, and still among the most deprived, ignored and exploited, of the world's population? Should we not, as educators, look within ourselves, and the systems of acquiring and transmission of knowledge that we have served and helped to develop to search for our errors and biases?

Feminist scholarship has been challenging the andocentric biases of knowledge establishments all over the world. Critics of the patterns and theories of development that dominated the global scene since the end of the Second World War have thrown up many denunciations of the urban bias in development planning. Neither of them, however, had viewed rural women as a significant group for investigation until Ester Boserup's classic¹ drew attention to this majority who had remained 'invisible' to most scholars, and the vast majority of the people whom we call 'educated' - i.e. the products of our formal educational institutions. Even when they came from rural families, the process of education that we put them through, put blinkers on their eyes, and made them blind to their own women - in their families, villages, in the community.

Let me illustrate this from a real life incident. My colleagues and I have been involved for the last six years in an action-research project - of employment generation for poor rural women through their own organisations. At the inception of this project, we were discussing possibilities with 64 women landless agricultural labourers, who had identified repeated seasonal migration for agricultural work to other districts as their biggest enemy. Everyone of them was a high-skilled agriculturist, but their own region being drought-prone, unirrigated and monocrop, could not provide them work for more than 6-8 weeks. The earlier generations had supported themselves during the lean seasons from forest produce - food, fodder, fuel and some livelihood, through processing of minor forest produce - making ropes, mats, crushing oil seeds, brewing liquor, making yarn from a wild silk worm², selling medicinal herbs, fruits and seeds to peripatetic traders and so on. but the forests had disappeared, and they had become increasingly dependent on seasonal migration to the 'green revolution' districts.³ The younger women, deprived to the forest from their childhood, and forced to shuttle to and fro with their

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mothers on these recurring treks, never acquired the forest lore, knowledge and skills that their grandmothers and other ancestresses had possessed. But they had acquired skills in paddy cultivation, by working with their mothers.

The woman decided that the price they paid for the recurring seasonal migration was too high - 50 per cent infant mortality, recurring abortions, loss of health and longevity, sexual harassment by labour contractors and employers, and perpetual indebtedness. They wanted work in their own area - so that they could send the kids to school, maintain and improve their homes, and perhaps get some chance to improve their own lot - may be learn something new that they could do to earn a better living, and protect their own and the children's health a bit more. To achieve this little, they were ready to form their own organisation.

The meeting was also attended by some local leaders, the Chairman of the block level Council,⁴ and a school master - who came from the same tribal community as the women. Both had been active peasant leaders. The school master suggested to us, "why don't you teach them to make shoulder bag?"⁵ My counter question was - "would you suggest the same for the men of these families?" The prompt reply was - "of course not, they (the men) are agricultural workers". When I asked, "these women are not agricultural workers?" There was a chorus of protest from the 64 women - "ask him if we have not worked on his fields and many others in the village?"

The Chairman of the Council was politically and otherwise more mature. He turned to the women and admitted that though a peasant's son by birth, he too had been a victim of this blindness "when the Government asked me to plan some income-generating activity for women; I too thought of sewing classes and tailoring shops, and forgot that most of you had joined actively in our movements for land reform, and fair price for forest products. I, too, didn't see you as primarily peasants and workers. I have learnt my lesson, and shall not repeat this mistake in future".

In the next few months, he assisted us in forming more such groups,⁶ and used his substantial influence on the local peasantry to transfer plots of wasteland which they could not cultivate, to the women's groups, as a basic asset. With government funding to meet their wage costs, the women transformed these plots into sericulture plantations, to revive the old forest based industry⁷ which had died out in this area.

This little story can be replicated from any part of the developing world. These two men were not anti-women, nor hostile to their earning a living. But their contact with education had blinded them to the reality of women's lives in their own villages. I would, therefore, reframe my earlier question. *Is the relationship between education and rural women to be a one way process - of us, the educated, providing knowledge to rural women? Or is it to be a two way process - of correcting our errors and removing our blinkers by first learning from them - of the reality of their lives, their store of skills and knowledge, their extraordinary capacity to survive on so*

little, and keep up their courage in the face of problems that would drive most of us to lunatic asylums or suicide.⁸ This question is being raised not only by women and development specialists, but by one of the most reputed agricultural scientists in the world,

“The greatest challenge before R&D institutions lies in motivating scientists and technologists to undertake a process of ‘listening and learning’ through collaboration with poor (rural) women while developing their research priorities and strategies. This will call for a *learning revolution*.”⁹

The Nairobi Document¹⁰ contains 129 paragraphs - almost one-third of the total, which are concerned with the education of women, their rights of access to education, training, information; the obstacles that prevent such access, the goals and uses of education; and concrete directions regarding areas to which education needs to be directed. I have singled out a few of these as particularly applicable to achieve the ‘learning revolution’ suggested by Swaminathan. The issue of equality of access has been discussed and debated for nearly a hundred years, and I doubt if anyone attending this Conference would challenge its validity.

The far more difficult and radical challenge that faces education systems all over the world today - is how to incorporate the women’s dimension into the educational process? As feminists we asked for this as a method of achieving gender equality or equity. As a recent critic of development, who began nearly three decades ago as a critic of the education system in my own country - desperately seeking for ways to prevent the process of alienation of education from socially relevant priorities¹¹ - I have found the answer from rural women.

As an education planner I was unaware of women’s issues. As a product of an urban middle class family and a hybrid education of institutions (all urban) in India and Britain, I was even less aware of rural women. As a first generation beneficiary of the equality clauses of the Indian Constitution, I accepted the facile theory that education and equal political rights would remove inequality for all women in time, not realising how the educational process itself was strengthening the hold of patriarchy and introducing new forces for inequality, subordination and marginalisation of women.

For nearly a decade, when I was preoccupied with discovering rural women, to identify their problems and needs, my colleagues and I found ourselves increasingly lapsing back from our researcher and teacher status to that of students and learners. Our experience with the investigation of the Committee on the Status of Women in India¹² had convinced us that we had a lot to unlearn, before we could contribute to new knowledge regarding women’s situations and roles in our society. We began with the feeling that what we had learnt in our years of social science theories and research methodology in the academic profession, had, to a very great extent, been responsible for the *invisibility* of women’s contribution, problems, and roles in earlier social science research in India. We attributed this

failure to Eurocentric theories of social transformation, and tools and methods of research that we had borrowed from the West.

It was, therefore, a deliberate decision, to avoid starting with any assumptions or framework while beginning research on the situation of poor rural women in different parts of the country. We decided to expose ourselves as much as possible to the empirical reality rather than analytical approaches borrowed from any other part of world.¹³

“In repeated cases, we observed with great delight, the transformation of perspectives, values and involvement, even the sense of identity of scholars who began to take up women focussed research, especially in the poverty sectors. *This process can only be described as a reversal of the normal learning process where the more educated teach and the less educated (in rural women’s case, mostly illiterate) are expected to learn. In its place, women’s studies or women focussed research in rural development in India (as elsewhere) has clearly emerged as a different process of generating what has been termed by a few social scientists as ‘organic knowledge’, in which the people being researched into are the real teachers and the scholars are learners.*”¹⁴

Only a fraction of the educated persons, manage to become researchers. How are we to introduce this unlearning and rethinking perspective into the educational process? The Nairobi document provides some answers. Paragraphs 82 recommends inclusion of women’s history and issues in the curriculum. Paragraphs 83 and 167 recommend revision of textbooks to reflect positive, dynamic and participatory images of women, and men’s involvement in family responsibilities. Paragraph 171 suggests elimination of sexual stereotypes from the educational system. Paragraphs 115 and 325 refer to the role of education in removing gender biases in development programmes, project in the centrality of women’s role in development. Paragraphs 85 and 165 seek the support of education and the use of women’s studies to change societal attitudes to women’s roles that reinforce inequalities.

It must be clear that none of these statements are referring to the education of women, but of needed reforms in educational systems - the methods and content of teaching, the value orientation, and the organisation of the educational process. They also challenge some of the post World War theories that sought to reduce the educational process, and both natural and human sciences to a *value neutral* position. Such theories still dominate many educational institutions, and have resulted in two parallel developments. On the one hand, critics of the value neutral position have attacked education as “a dependent function of the power and production structures” which cannot play any role in the achievement of social justice.¹⁵ On the other side of the fence are the power-bosses of the world, always suspicious of the dissent that educational institutions tend to generate, and the autonomy they demand in the pursuit of knowledge and its dissemination. These bosses would like to reduce educational system to a *mere skill-generating role*, in the name of value neutrality, scientific, technological and economic manpower requirement, and a *static* concept of relevance. Yet educational institutions are

expected to produce the planners, not only of tomorrow, but for the 21st century and beyond, if the power-bosses leave us a world to plan for. The theory of value neutrality of educational institutions, in my opinion, is a conspiracy to reduce educators to a powerless, non-participatory passive status. Academic objectivity and scientific rationality or honesty to one's data are not value neutral. They are values in themselves.¹⁶

All educators who reject the theory of value neutrality of education should thank the international women's movement for coming to our rescue by placing value and attitudinal transformation squarely as a central task of educational agencies.

The Indian women's movement in its earlier phases had placed all its hopes on the issue of ensuring equal access for women to all types and levels of Education.¹⁷ However, the need to abolish sex-role stereotypes, by non-differentiation of curricula by gender was also addressed,¹⁸ and featured in Five Year Plan documents and the first National Policy Statement on Education adopted by Parliament in 1968. This stand rejected the practice of the Colonial Regime, and reflected the Constitutional guarantee that "the State shall not discriminate on grounds of sex".¹⁹

But policy statements were not always implemented, especially in school education, where Home Science continued to be taught to girls only, and many girls' schools did not have arrangements for proper teaching of science and mathematics. In some states, boys were not permitted to take up fine arts. No one thought of introducing subjects like agriculture, animal husbandry or forestry in girls institutions. Even the Agricultural Universities, established on the model of Landgrant Colleges in the United States, did not encourage girls to enter such courses, but established Home Science Colleges within their campuses to attract rural girls.

In contrast to this, Indian Universities for general education threw open all their courses to women from the 19th century, using their autonomy to ignore the Raj's policy of discrimination. In the post-independence period, Indian Universities providing general education expanded enrollment of women in both arts and science courses, and the University Grants Commission followed a liberal policy in promoting science education in girls' colleges. This situation was, however, not reflected in the professional courses, except education and medicine.²⁰

The CSWI observed that from early childhood boys and girls were indoctrinated to accept gender inequality through a powerful socialisation process and

"The only institution which could counteract the effect of this process is the education system. If education is to promote equality for women, it must make a deliberate, planned and sustained effort so that the new values 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 curricula, the classification of subjects on the basis of sex and the unwritten code of conduct enforced on the public.”

The CSWI’s challenge generated a new debate on the inter-relationship between gender equality and educational development. The explosion of research based evidence on the adverse impact of economic modernisation, social change and population dynamics on poor working women, especially in rural areas and urban slums - (majority of the latter being migrants from rural areas), encouraged a group of academics to demand incorporation of women’s studies within the educational curriculum, to avoid such “intellectual marginalisation” of women’s issues in future.²¹

This increasing demand received some positive response from senior academics concerned about educational reform. The University Grants Commission issued a letter to all Vice-Chancellors in 1983 asking them to seriously think about incorporating problems of women’s status in their teaching, research and extension activities.

At a national seminar supported by the UGC in Delhi University in 1985 several Vice-Chancellors and senior teachers (men and women) described the role of women’s studies as primarily one of changing values and attitudes,

*“to counter reactionary forces emanating from certain sections of the media - economic, social and political institutions, that encourage the demotion of women from productive to mere reproductive roles; to revitalise university education, bringing it closer to burning social issues, to work towards their solution, and to produce more sensitive persons able to play more committed and meaningful roles in development, activities for women in all sectors; ... to generate new and organic knowledge through intensive field work, ... for evaluation and correction of development policies and extending areas for academic analysis into hitherto neglected sectors”.*²²

The debate was intensified during the year long consultations for formulating a new National Policy on Education (NPE) which was adopted by Parliament in May 1986, Part IV of the Policy Document, titled Education for Equality, contains the following paragraphs:

“Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralise the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well-conceived edge in favour of women. The National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision-makers and administrators, and the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women’s Studies will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women’s studies will be promoted as a

part of various courses and educational institutions encouraged to take up active programmes to further women's development.

The removal of women's illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to and retention in elementary education will receive overriding priority, through provision of special support services, setting of time targets, and effective monitoring. Major emphasis will be laid on women's participation in vocational, technical and professional education at different levels. The policy of non-discrimination will be pursued vigorously to eliminate sex stereotyping in vocational and professional courses and to promote women's participation in non-traditional occupations, as well as in existing and emergent technologies".

Some spelling out of the concept of *empowerment* was also attempted in the Programme of Action for the NPE adopted by Parliament in July 1986. The primary emphasis is on organising women at the grassroots, to encourage reflection, self-reliance and collective learning and productive activity.

This link between grassroot organisation - of women producers, and their empowerment to participate more effectively in the developmental and the political process by giving them 'social strength' is also admitted in the Seventh Five Year Plan and in some plan programmes adopted by different ministries.²³ There is nothing new in this idea. It has been debated and articulated in virtually all conferences on women and development, national and international. What is new is the effort to enlist the active support of educational institutions in bringing this about.

Till recently, all concerned with planning strategies to bring about gender equality - at national and international levels tended to depend on government action or action by non-governmental organisations. The support of individual academics was harnessed mainly to do research - diagnostic or evaluative. The first suggestion that educational institutions also need to play a role in this field was hinted at the Copenhagen Conference, but the Programme of Action does not clearly articulate how that role should be played.

The pre-Nairobi Conference of Non-aligned and other developing countries went further - by stating that education systems in these countries had actually strengthened stereotyped images of women's roles based on the experiences of the urban middle class or the social elite.²⁴ Criticising "the failure of education systems in fulfilling their role", of promoting values conducive to women's equality, the Conference observed:

"Structurally, pedagogically and philosophically educational institutions need to play a far more active role in the development of a new cultural ethos that can contribute to the realisation of the goals of comprehensive development of human material and this also requires that they internalise the concern for the equality of women and the enhancement of their role - in

their curricula, method, organisation and research agenda ... the promotion of new knowledge about women and new perceptions of the role of women in development should be viewed as an instrument for educational and cultural development for the younger generation."²⁵

Two months after the Nairobi Conference, an expert meeting organised by UNESCO articulated the close-relationship between educational development and the incorporation of women's issues within the educational process still more explicitly:

"The exclusion of the issues of women's subordination, discrimination and emancipation from the arena of scientific and intellectual discussion has contributed to their continuation and has facilitated the perpetuation of false rationalisations or justifications of subordination as resulting from natural or biological causes. Such facile generalisations continue to influence women's access to and role in all levels of education and research, including special sectors that carry weight, prestige and power, such as science and technology.

The process of rethinking or revaluation of women's situation and roles has to begin from the earliest stages of education. In order to achieve that, however, efforts have also to be mounted to reorient higher stages of education. This calls for

- a) Higher level of investment in research on women's issues;
- b) Inclusion of women's issues as an integral part of the teaching curriculum in various disciplines;
- c) Increasing women's participation in the implementation of these activities. The group believes that this will also facilitate needed reforms in education systems".

"Part of the task of the social and human science, and also of philosophy, is to articulate and bring to the surface the various paradigms and presuppositions concerning the role, status, and supposed nature of women, so as to be able to examine them in a clear and informed manner. Such paradigms continue to influence the thought and action not only of the person in the street but also of educators and researchers in their professional work. This is not to say that the social and human sciences already possess all the information and conceptualisation necessary to answer the many questions that arise concerning the sources of discrimination and role determination of women, *indeed, a sustained effort continues to be needed to fill a gap that until now has been far too neglected.*"

"While priority in the effort to understand and change the situation of women will have to be given to the social and human sciences, the Group is of the view that associating women's concerns and interests with the

activities of other sciences - notably the exact sciences and technological fields, including the new technologies and their applications - is of prime importance. The fundamental changes that are taking place all over the world resulting from developments in science and technology have yet to be studied for their social and ethical implications. Examining these issues from a women's perspective is critically needed, and planning for this should immediately be undertaken if women are to be prepared for the rapid transformation taking place in their professional and private lives, and to be able to effectively influence decision-making in this regard".

"In recent years, women's studies and research from women's perspectives have already challenged many established theories and paradigms in the social and human sciences. However, such challenges remain inadequately reflected in the teaching curricula and research planning of institutions of higher education and all other bodies responsible for research policy and investment. Where such courses have entered, they are tolerated as adjuncts, or marginal elements. *It is important that they influence, and interact on equal terms, with the main disciplinary courses, and establish parity both on the level of teaching and on the level of associated research*".²⁶

In the case of developing countries particularly, intervention for women's equality and development, whether prompted by government or other agencies, always has to contain a hard core of educational, information gathering, communicational and training activities. It is impracticable to expect bureaucracy to play this role. NGOs concerned with women's issues in these countries are mostly based in urban areas, and lack both human and financial resources to undertake all the tasks that are involved - research, communication, mobilisation, training, obtaining resource support, even legal and political support in some cases. Nor do many such organisations exist in all developing countries. But educational institutions, of varied quality, have come to exist in most parts of the developing world. They do possess some of the skills, the infrastructural support, and above all the human resources to play this role.

In a country like India, another argument to introduce this concept into the Education Policy was the public accountability of most educational institutions. Not all the NGOs are committed to women's equality. Fundamentalist conservatism has also promoted NGOs, as they have promoted some educational institutions also. But the latter are more exposed to public scrutiny than the former.

Lastly, the link between this 'interventionist role' and 'internalisation of the concern' for enhancing women's role in development projects makes it a mutually supportive, participatory relationship between grassroots groups of poor women in both rural and urban areas, and educational institutions which need to transform themselves through such exposure and intervention. The long-term effects of such an interaction can be revolutionary.

III

If education is to become an active agent for ending gender inequality, it requires a new perspective, new methods and tools, and new knowledge - (a) about the centrality of women's role to correct the peasant iniquitous and destructive path of development; and (b) about the origin of women's subordination in society. It is the contention of this paper that the key to these two critical issues lie in the past and contemporary histories of rural women, to a far greater extent than in the experiences of their counterparts in urban areas, because one finds far clearer gender differentials in the assessment of problems, priorities, values and demands in rural than in urban areas in developing countries.

There has been an explosion of information about the destructive consequences of ignoring rural women's critical role in the production of food, the sustenance of their families and the community and the preservation of their environment, which would be difficult to condense in this paper. I will, therefore, concentrate on a few crucial aspects.

"The socio-economic formations in the rural sector are the primary organisations of production in which women's role has a pivotal importance in most parts of the developing world. In the rural areas of these countries, women work in all capacities, in growing food, post-harvest operations, marketing, animal husbandry and related activities. In addition, they spend considerable time in gather fuel and fetching water. In several cases they also work as wage labour on farms. The FAO has estimated that sometimes women's work could be longer than men's work by as much as 43 per cent.²⁷ Many parts of Africa have a large incidence of female-headed households where women undertake the sole responsibility of growing food. It is in spite of these facts that women have generally been seen as consumers and not as producers in the book-keeping system of development.²⁸ Such attitudes have resulted in not only adversely affecting the consumer status of women, but have also put development projects in jeopardy.²⁹ Since women's role is vital, they be included as explicit target groups in rural development, land reforms and technological infusion. This requires a prior understanding of women's work in different geographic and cultural settings".³⁰

The problem of invisibility, undercounting and undervaluation of women's work in agriculture surfaced with a vengeance during the women's decade, not only due to the pressure of feminist scholarship, but the growing developmental crisis, especially in food production, environmental destruction with deforestation, the 'other' energy crisis, and mass migration of the rural unemployed to cities and metropolitan countries in search of employment. This forced various international and national agencies to revise their earlier estimates of women's contribution to agriculture. Tables 1 and 2 provide two such revised estimates undertaken by FAO and ILO, the first for 82 and the second for 94 countries.

According to Sarthi Acharya, who, unlike me, is a specialist in quantitative analysis, and has been also examining rural women's *actual* work at the field level, even these revisions are not adequate because they suffer from the basic limitations of data imposed on national data collection agencies such as the Census, by internationally standardised definitions of work. One of the sharpest condemnation of these 'fuzzy' definitions, and consequent underassessment of rural women's work as 'supplementary', or 'non-productive' through faulty delineations has come, again, not from a feminist scholar, but a highly reputed male census expert and population analyst.

"In reality there are extraordinarily few areas where woman's economic contribution could be dismissed as merely supplementary, or optional or dispensable. But this myth has been very successfully practised increasingly over the ages in protean form to keep women under subjugation, politically, economically and socially."³¹

I am no believer in the male conspiracy theory of women's subordination. But as a person who has spent 52 years of my life in and around educational institutions, I have to ask the question, *can we as educators absolve ourselves of all responsibility for the perpetuation and strengthening of this 'protean form' of subjugation of women? Who helped to develop these definitions, the methodology and the tools for the undervaluation of women's work?* At one of the earlier seminars (1978) on rural women's work situations in India, a senior women scholar, who had been involved in designing the first farm management surveys, (she was trained in Harvard) stood up and confessed that she had measured the value of women's work, not in terms of the labour input, but in terms of the lower wages that they received.

Swaminathan argues that ignoring rural women's higher skills in certain agricultural operations, such as seed selection, storage, pre-germination tests, pollination, transplantation, all post-harvest operations, as well as cattle care and other livestock rearing has, in fact, arrested the growth of agricultural productivity. Improving their access to available new knowledge, not only in these areas, but in soil fertility and fertiliser management, integrated post and weed management, water and soil conservation, would make a major impact on rice agriculture.³²

A great deal of evidence is now available that links the present food crisis in Africa to the neglect of the subsistence sector, where women predominate, in African agricultural development. The traditional sexual division of labour varies across different regions of Africa, but the predominance of women's role is indicated in Table 3. Women are the 'prime-movers' in the food economy, but have been losing ground steadily in access to quality land, better implements and seeds, and loss of customary usufructory rights to land, irrespective of their marital status.³³ As in the case of poor rural women in Asia, their labour time has increased, but the rewards are less.

Despite legislative protection of equal pay for equal work in many countries, all over the world rural women receive less wages for their labour. This is

acknowledged in the World Labour Report, but is inadequately documented. One major problem that has affected both planners' and analysts of rural society, is the myth of the homogeneity of rural women. Rural societies like urban societies in most parts of the world, are fragmented by socio-economic class, occupational groups, and ethnic and other cultural identities. Except in occasional isolated areas where simple communities still continue to subsist on primitive agriculture or food gathering, most rural communities have experienced radical changes in their socio-economic organisation, production systems and relations, and the changes that come with increasing penetration of a magnetised economy, state and legal control over basic resources and population pressures. Different groups of rural women are affected differently by these changes. In the South Asian context, a hierarchical pattern of social organisation had emerged much earlier than elsewhere. In such societies, withdrawal of women from visible economic activity was, and continues to be a symbol of higher social status.³⁴

Based on my limited experience of rural societies, mostly confined to South Asia rural women can be classified into five major categories, which sometimes overlap.

- A. *Women engaged in Agriculture:* this would be further subdivided into three groups - (i) women from the upper strata, landowning families, who do not engage in field agriculture, but play a major role in supervision of farm labour, and post-harvest operations;³⁵ (ii) women from landowning, small farmer families who work on the family land, but do not undertake wage work in agriculture; (iii) women from marginal farmers or landless households who are compelled to seek wage work for survival.
- B. Women engaged in other agro-based occupations, e.g. animal husbandry, horticulture, sericulture, fisheries, dairying, food processing etc.
- C. Women artisans involved in various crafts, e.g. spinning, weaving, pottery, other handicrafts.
- D. Women involved in forest based occupations, such as collection of minor forest produce (leaves, fruits, seeds, roots, grass, wood etc.) not only for their own consumption, but also for the market, to earn a livelihood. The reverberations of the deforestation and energy crisis has led to a lot of passionate advocacy of remedying the dwindling stock of fuel and fodder stocks of poor rural women, but when one closely examines the Social Forestry Programmes funded by agencies like the World Bank, serious doubts arise about the motive behind such concern. I shall discuss this further later.

One truth is, however, evident. *None of the Social Forestry planners have ever viewed forests as a source of economic activity for women, though the colonial legacy, of seeing forests as a source of revenue has affected many post-colonial states. Such revenue is not collected from, or by the local people, who depend on the forest for their survival but from distant industries often*

controlled by Multinational Corporations for whom forests are only a commodity, to generate more profits through manufacture - of paper, pharmaceuticals, solid fuel for rocket propulsion, and timber for all sorts of use.

So the state, and industrial houses can use forests for earning but *Social Forestry* is propagated to provide rural women access to fuel and fodder only. The bias - of seeing women only as home-makers, cooks and child-rearers persist, with the minor addition of dairying as a 'suitable' "income-generating" activity for rural women. The fact that rearing milch cattle requires substantial other resources, possibly within the reach of women in category A and B but not for the majority of women in other categories has not occurred to these planners, because they have never really asked the women what their priorities are.³⁶

- E. The last category consists of women involved in retail distribution and other services often connected with one or more of the earlier groups. The capitalisation of markets and the emergence of middle men or monopolists who control particular products, either at the raw material end, or at the finished product marketing end, have affected the retailers most adversely, pushing them more into agriculture or migration. The traditional service occupations, e.g. women barbers who also acted as midwives, healers have also lost out to more formally trained health professionals.

It is easy to see that one set of macro-changes, such as deforestation/afforestation, or a major irrigation project *drowning* a large tract of land, new agricultural technology, or the emergence of mass produced consumption goods like mill cloth, aluminium pots and pans, the arrival of mills to process cereals, or oilseeds etc. would not affect all these categories equally. For some it could mean increased prosperity, reduction of drudgery, possibility of education, but also increased changes of greater subordination within the family. For others, it could mean temporary increase in work opportunity but no decrease in labour time to obtain education or better health care. For still others, the disappearance, or shrinkage of employment avenues may leave only migration - seasonal or permanent, as the answer. The latter has been noticed both in the case of artisans and women in forest based occupations, many of whom were drafted as plantation or mine labour.

The gender-differential in perception of priorities in forest use and forest development has been the sharpest. Women opposed destruction of forests for industrial growth, or potato farming,³⁷ and have been even more vehement in their opposition to planting of eucalyptus in the name of social forestry.³⁸

"The forest gave us food, fodder, fuel and a livelihood. Trees are like our limbs, each time one is cut, our chances of survival is reduced. When we sometimes cut trees for contractors, we cut our own limbs, but when the children are hungry, our immediate need for some cash coincides with the

contractors' profit motive. If we can see this connection, why can't the *Sarkar* (Government)?

They cut the trees that kept us alive - then they come and plant eucalyptus. Go and tell the *Sarkar* that eucalyptus gives us nothing - it only prevents other things like grass growing there. The goats and the cattle don't want it, *we* don't want it, but the Forest Department gives free eucalyptus samplings to our men to plant in our own backyard. The men tell us that they will earn a pot of money five years later by selling the eucalyptus. But we will lose two children during those five years, because there is nothing to eat, not even fruits. When the Forest Department pays *us* a day's wage, to plant some eucalyptus trees on the roadside, or on the forest department's land, we feel we are committing a sin. But one day's wage may keep a child for a week or more, so we go on sinning."³⁹

A painful fact in the eucalyptus debate is the questionable role of many forest scientists, like that of many members of the medical profession in the breast-feeding controversy, or on the issue of use of hormonal drugs during pregnancy.

Most development agencies now pay at least lip service to the critical role of `people's participation in forest development, but the social and gender hierarchy in rural societies leaves one open to question `who are the people'? C.P. Bhatt, one of the leaders, and mediators in the gender rift within the *Chipko* movement, clearly states that when it comes to ignoring women's needs, there is nothing to choose between the state or the locally elected councils.

"Having one or two women on these bodies cannot substitute the collective voice of women in regard to conservation, development and use of forests".⁴⁰

At a recent workshop⁴¹ on Women, Social Forestry and Wasteland Development, even elected Chairman of these bodies confirmed this fact, and recommended the need to have representatives of grassroot women's organisations on these bodies, rather than individual women.

It is time to conclude this paper, which has already become too long. To fellow educators who have assembled here from different countries to discuss the future role of education in achieving gender equality, I have two messages from millions of rural women of my country, and I believe, from many other parts of the world. The first is to recognise and support their collective struggle for human survival, including their own, against the destruction of their productive base, land, water, forests and other natural resources by types of development that are planned far away from them, by people and agencies they are not aware of, and *through the use or misuse of knowledge power which has been kept away from them by a process of historical change that has increased their powerlessness, and deprivation.*

The second message is from us, the intermediaries in the academic profession, because our rural women's original contribution to human civilisation is lost even to their memory.

"Some historians of agriculture believe that it was women who first domesticated crop plants and thereby initiated the art and science of farming. While men went out hunting in search of food, women started gathering seeds from the native flora and began cultivating those of interest from the point of view of food, feed, fodder, fibre, fuel. This view is strengthened by the fact that women have been traditionally seed selectors. Even today, this tradition has continued in many parts of the developing world".⁴²

This view is supported by many anthropologists, and at least one historian of ancient India.⁴³ The legend has also been preserved in some ancient temple murals in parts of North-East India, where agriculture is still primarily a women's occupation.

On the basis of archaeological and anthropological evidence, D.D. Kosambi has also argued that pottery was begun by women on the Indian sub-continent.⁴⁴ Lastly, there is mounting evidence, from documentary⁴⁵ as well as archaeological and anthropological sources, that spinning and weaving of textiles, from natural fibres, was entirely initiated by women.

Food, clothing and pots to cook in - are the beginnings of productive activity or civilised living. If women were the initiators of these in a subcontinent the size of India, what was the story elsewhere? Surely it was the same in most parts of Africa? Who is going to restore this lost heritage to rural women, and thereby change the attitude of the educated women and men, all over the world?

What freedoms gave them such creative energy, which has been kept curbed by generations of subordination and powerlessness? Why and how did this subordination take place? Who is to find the answers to these questions and use them to build new minds who think differently about women?

Only educational institutions can play this role - through research and teaching. That to me is the most important message from Nairobi, of the use of women's history.

We do not need new agencies to educate rural women. We need a new perspective, for educational institutions all over the world, to play a new role.

Notes and References

1. Ester Boserup - **Role of Women in Economic Development**, 1970.
2. The product is known as *Tussar* silk, a tough fabric with great longevity.
3. For a detailed and moving account of the chain reaction of loss of land and forests to these women's and their children's lives, see D. Bandyopadhyay - **Travails of Tribal Women - Mainstream**, 14th June 1980; See also N.K. Banerjee - **Women's Participation and Development: A Case Study from West Bengal**, CWDS, Occasional Paper No. 5, 1985.
4. The second tier of representative government from below. The first tier consists of the *Gram Panchayat* - an elected Council that incorporates 5-6 villages. The second tier is the *Block Panchayat Samiti* or *Council*. A Block is the smallest administrative unit of government from above, and generally includes a group of 8-10 *Gram Panchayats*.
5. Cotton shopping bags, woven in narrow 'hobby looms' - popularised among students of Shantiniketan, the educational institution in rural Bengal started by the Nobel Laureate Poet, Rabindranath Tagore, seven decades ago, in his effort to incorporate a rural reconstruction programme through his education institution. Now a hall mark of left oriented students and others in the state, and elsewhere. But thanks to the decision of both governments and many NGOs to pick on this activity for income generation for women, the price of the bags had remained static for the last 10 years, though yarn prices have gone up by nearly 300%.
6. Now there are seven organisations with 1300 members drawn from 27 villages.
7. The *Tussar* industry in this region dates back at least to the time of *Arthashastra of Kautilya*, written sometime in the 4th Century B.C. It was a popular and paying item of export to the Roman Empire and to other parts of Europe by middle-eastern traders through the medieval period until the 18th century. The East India Company originally exported the fabric, but its political control over the region converted this flourishing cottage industry into a raw yarn producing one to feed the British textile industry during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. *Tussar* produced by British manufacturers was a popular suiting for the colonial regimes in all tropical regions. The forest dwellers' earnings remained confined to collection of cocoons from the forest and hand spinning of yarn by their women till the early years of the twentieth century, after which the rapid disappearance of the forests put this livelihood beyond their reach.

Most of this account is based on ongoing research initiated by the CWDS, see Abhijit Dasgupta et. al. - *"The Peasant Girl and the Goblins: Role of Women in the Silk Industry of Bengal (forthcoming)*; and Narayan Banerjee, *Women's Work, Family Strategies and the Role of State: Case Study of a Forestion Region in Bankura District, West Bengal*, (nearing completion).
8. *The Seeds of Change: Role of Grassroot Rural Women's Organisations in Development* - Report of a Training Workshop for government functionaries (elected and bureaucrats) implementing the programme Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) - conducted by CWDS and the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, at Mukutmanipur, Bankura, West Bengal, in November 1986.
9. M.S.Swaminathan - *The Role of Education and Research in Enhancing Rural Women's Income and Household Happiness* (1st J.P. Naik Memorial Lecture, 1982) - CWDS, 1985; p. 38. At the time of this lecture, Swaminathan was Director-General, International Rice Research Institute, Manila, and Chairman, Governing Council of FAO. A Borlaug Award Winner and Fellow of the Royal Society, his interests cover agriculture, forestry, conservation of natural resources, science, technology and human resource development. In this

document, he lists many areas of training and education for rural women to improve productivity in rice agriculture.

10. *Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000: Report of the UN World Conference, Nairobi, 1985.* An excellent summary has been published by the Hubert H. Humphrey, Institute of Public Affairs; University of Minnesota, which also lists, in an appendix, the 129 paragraphs concerning education.
11. After 16 years of university teaching, during which much of my criticisms of Indian university Education was formulated, I joined the Secretariat of the University Grants Commission, to try my hand at higher education reform and development, and learnt a great deal about problems of development of a national university system, their linkages with international trends in educational transformation, and the role of colonialism and Neo-colonialism in widening the gap between the educational and social processes. Some of these ideas, in their initial tentative form, were articulated in a small monograph written for the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla - See Vina Mazumdar, *Education and Social Changes: Three Studies on 19th Century Bengal*, I.A.A.A 1972. For a more developed, excellently written presentation in a global perspective, see R.P. Dore - *The Diploma Disease*.
12. Appointed by the Government of India in 1971. Submitted its Report, titled *Towards Equality*, on 1st January 1975. This document provided the basis for a new Parliamentary mandate to the Government to mount comprehensive legislative and developmental efforts "to remove disparities and disabilities that the majority of women continue to suffer from". It provided considerable fuel for the revival of the women's movement, the beginning of research focussed on 'invisible' women by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, and the beginnings of policy debates that continue to rage within and outside the Government. But for the handful of persons concerned with the Committee's direct investigations, particularly the three academics, (all of whom are now in CWDS), the effect was a transformation of perspectives, ideas and life-styles. A similar effect has been noted by many others, - men and women - involved in women and development research.
13. An Expert Group Meeting sponsored by UNESCO in Delhi, October 1982, defined women's studies as "critical instrument for social science development to bring it closer to Asian Realities" - see *Women's Studies and Social Science in Asia*, UNESCO; Office of the Regional Adviser for Social Science, Bangkok, 1983.
14. *Supra*, Footnote 8.
15. There is a whole school of these critics - Ivan Illyitch, Pablo Latapi, Paolo Frere and others.
16. For an objective statement of this position, see *Education and National Development: Report of the Indian Education Commission (1964-66)*, Government of India, Ministry of Education, 1966. According to the Commission, the primary task before the Indian Education system was not only to meet the manpower requirements of scientific, technological and economic development, but to prepare the future generations for a new social order, based on the principles of secularism, socialism and democracy. For a still more blunt and forthright statement, see J.P. Naik, *Equality, Quality and Quantity: The Elusive Triangle of Indian Education*, ICSSR, 1977.
17. Representation by Women Graduates Association to the Calcutta University Commission (1917); Report of the National Committee on Women's Education, Government of India, Ministry of Education, 1959.
18. Report of the Committee on Differentiation of Curricula for Boys and Girls; Government of India, Ministry of Education, 1964. The Committee's recommendations were endorsed totally by the Indian Education Commission in 1966.
19. Article 16 of the Constitution of the Indian Republic (1950).

20. *Towards Equality*: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Chapter 6, Government of India, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, 1975; *Women in India*: Official Country Paper prepared for Nairobi, Government of India, Ministry of Women's and Social Welfare, 1985; Vina Mazumdar, *Education for Women's Equality*, theme paper prepared for the Government of India's National Seminar, November 1985; Balaji Pandey and Vina Mazumdar, Case Study of National Council for Educational Research and Training in the series National Specialised Agencies and Women's Equality, CWDS, 1988.
21. *Report of the First National Conference on Women's Studies, SNDT Women's University, Bombay 1981*; *Report of the Second National Conference on Women's Studies, Trivandrum, Indian Association for Women's Studies, Delhi 1984*; *Women's Studies and Social Science in Asia, UNESCO, op.cit: Report of the Seminar on Perspectives and Organisation of Women's Studies Units in Indian Universities, Dept. of Political Science, Delhi University 1985*; *Report of Women NGO's National Consultation on the Achievements and Failure of the Women's Decade, 1985 (mimeo)*.
22. Delhi University Seminar; Ibid.
23. Department of Rural Development - Programme of Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas; Department of Women and Child Development - Programme of Support to Employment Programmes for Women (all in rural sector): Ministry of Labour and Employment - Assistance to organise Women Workers (rural and urban).
24. Ongoing research in several Asian countries by both Asian and foreign scholars, is beginning to re-examine the familial role of urban elite women in countries which had experienced colonial rule. They claim that the urban elite absorbed this model of women's role in the family from their rulers, often through the system of colonial education, and the compulsions of urbanisation which called for substantial changes in the structure and life styles of the elite families.

The whole issue of women's education, its content, the values that it promoted, and the pressures that it generated on the minds of such elite women is proving to be a fascinating example of *global export of a role model that often bore little resemblance to what was demanded by the cultural traditions - of the indigenous societies*. What was initiated by colonial education, is being continued by the consumerist culture.

One such cross-cultural study, of rapidly industrialising societies, which tends to project the housewife as a consumer, to promote markets, *on Women's Work and Family Strategies in South and South East Asia*, sponsored by UNU, is being coordinated by CWDS and the Asian Development Studies Centre of Boston University. The 22 studies under this project are nearing completion. Studies by Malavika Karlekar (CWDS, Delhi) and Wazir Jahan Karim (University Sains Malaysia, Penang) especially focus on this issue in two distinct cultural contexts.

25. *New Delhi Document on Women and Development* - Report of the Ministerial Level Conference of Non-aligned and other Developing Countries on Role of Women in Development, New Delhi, 1985, paragraphs 229 and 232.
26. Report of the International Meeting of Experts on "*Reflections on Women's Problems in Research and Higher Education*", Lisbon, September 1985, UNESCO SHS/CONF/85/612/16.
27. FAO 1983, Follow-up to WCARRD: The Role of Women in Agricultural Production; Expert Consultation on Women and Food Production, ESH: WIEP/83/11, Rome.
28. UNDP 1980, Rural Women's Participation in Development: Evaluation Study No. 3, New York.

29. Jennie Dey, "Gambian Women: Unequal Partners in Rice Development Projects" in N. Nelson - *African Women in Development Process*, London 1981; J. Hanger and J. Morris - "Women and the Household Economy" in R. Chambers and J. Morris (eds.) *Mwea, An Irrigated Rice Settlement in Kenya; Munich 1973*; I. Palmer, *The Nemo Case: Case Studies of the Impact of Large Scale Development Projects on Women*, Population Council, New York, 1979.
30. Sarthi Acharya, *Women and Rural Development in the Third World*, TISS, Bombay, 1987, p. 2-3.
31. Asok Mitra et. al., *The Status of Women: Shifts in Occupational Patterns, 1961-71*, p. 49, Delhi 1979.
32. Swaminathan, *op.cit.*
33. ILO - *Resources, Power and Women*; Report of an Asian African International Workshop on Strategies for Improving Employment Conditions of Rural Women, Geneva, 1985; International Centre for Public Enterprises in Developing Countries - *Role of Women in Developing Countries*, Ljubljana 1985; *New Delhi Document on Women and Development*, *op.cit* see also Sarthi Acharya, *op.cit.*
34. *Ibid.* The Sociological classic based on Indian experience that identified this process long before the Women's Decade is by M.N. Srinivas, in his essay on the Theory of Sanskritisation. See M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, 1966; also his *Changing Position of Indian Women* (Thomas Huxley Memorial Lecture, Royal Institute of Anthropology, London, 1977); *Towards Equality* *op.cit.* Scarlett Epstein - *South India, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, 1972.
35. Joan Mencher and K. Saradamoni - Role of Women in Rice Farming Systems in Proceedings of the Workshop on the same theme, International Rice Research Institute, Manila, 1983. For an excellent pen portrait of one of these women farm managers, see Mina Swaminathan, 'Chellamma' in D. Jain (ed.) *Indian Women*, Government of India, Publications Division, 1975.
36. Anil Agarwal - *Try Asking the Women First* - series of newspaper articles that criticised national programmes of biogas development, social forestry and drinking water supply for failure to involve the primary consumers and victims of these scarcities in the planning and implementation of these programmes cited in Swaminathan, *op.cit.*, p. 7-8. See also the 1st and 2nd Citizen's Report on the State of India's Environment, 1982 and 1985, Centre for Science and Environment, Delhi; Kumud Sharma - *Women in Struggle: A Case Study of the Chipko Movement*, CWDS (Mimeo); for an abridged version. See, ILO, Geneva or *Samya Shakti* (Journal of Women's Studies) CWDS, Delhi, 1984; Kumud Sharma et.al. *Social Forestry and Women's Development: Need for Rethinking*, CWDS - forthcoming.
37. Kumud Sharma - *Chipko*, *op.cit.*
38. Vandana Shiva and J. Bandyopadhyay, *Ecological Audit of Eucalyptus Cultivation*. Dehradun 1985; see also J. Bandyopadhyay, N.D. Juyal, V. Scoettli, Chhatrapati Singh (eds.) - *India's Environment Crisis and Responses*; Dehradun, 1985.
39. Voices heard at rural women's camp conducted by CWDS, 1982-83. See *Face to Face with Rural Women*, (CWDS - forthcoming).
40. Statement made at two seminars where the author was present. Reported by Kalpana Sharma in her Sunday column 'The Other Half', *Indian Express*, January 1985.
41. August 27-30, 1987, so the report will take sometime to surface. The workshop was organised by CWDS on the request of the Government of India, to sensitise officials

(bureaucrats and elected involved in afforestation programmes on the need to involve women from the planning stage.

42. Swaminathan, *op.cit*, p. 9.
43. D.D. Kosambi, *Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, Delhi, 1974.
44. *Ibid*, p. 37.
45. *Rgveda (1500-1200 B.C.)* cited in Kosambi; p. 80, *Arthasastra*, cited in Dasgupta et.al. - *Women in the Silk Industry*, *op.cit*.

Table 1

**Sex Composition of the Agricultural
Labour Force in 82 Countries**

Region	Females as a percentage of agricultural labour force
Sub Saharan Africa	46
North Africa/Middle East	31
Asia	45
Caribbean	40
Average	42

Source: FAO, 1983: (a) "Follow-up to WCARRD: The Role of Women in Agricultural Production", Expert Consultation on Women and Food Production, ESH: WIFP/83/11, Rome.

Table 2

**Females as Percentage of the Total Agricultural
Labour Force according to ILO Estimates and
Revised Estimates: 94 Countries**

Region and Country	1970	
	<u>ILO</u>	<u>Revised</u>
<u>Southern Africa</u>		
Botswana	57	58
Lesotho	64	52
Namibia	24	38
<u>West Africa</u>		
Central Africa Republic	53	56
Zaire	52	55
Gambia	49	53
Mali	48	53
Cameroon	48	53
Upper Volta	46	52
Ivory Coast	45	51
Guinea	44	50
Gabon	44	50
Senegal	44	50
Seirre Leone	40	48
Liberia	39	47
Ghana	39	47
Nigeria	38	47
Togo	37	46
Congo	36	46
Chad	25	39
Benin	14	32
Niger	10	30
Angola	6	27
<u>East Africa</u>		
Rwanda	50	54
Burundi	48	53
Tanzania	39	48
Kenya	37	45

Uganda	36	45
Ethiopia	36	45
Mozambique	33	44
Somalia	32	43
Zimbabwe	32	43
Zambia	31	43
Mauritius	22	37
Sudan	10	30

North Africa

Morocco	10	30
Mauritania	5	27
Egypt	4	26
Algeria	2	25
Libya	2	25
Tunisia	1	25

Middle East

Turkey	47	52
Cyprus	46	52
Lebanon	20	36
Syria	14	32
Yemen PDR	6	28
Iran	5	27
Jordan	4	27
Yemen AR	4	27
Iraq	2	25
Saudi Arabia	6	27

South Asia

Nepal	42	49
India	38	47
Sri Lanka	28	41
Afghanistan	19	36
Bangladesh	17	34
Pakistan	11	31

South-East Asia

Thailand	50	54
Laos	48	53
Kampuchea	44	50
Malaysia	38	47
Burma	30	42
Philippines	22	37
Indonesia	30	42

East Asia

Korea DPR	55	57
Republic of Korea	38	47

Central America

Panama	5	18
Cuba	5	18
Mexico	4	17
Nicaragua	3	16
El Salvador	3	16
Guatemala	2	15
Costa Rica	2	15
Dominican Republic (a)	2	15
Honduras	1	14

South America

Peru	10	23
Brazil	9	22
Bolivia	8	21
Paraguay	6	19
Ecuador	6	19
Argentina	6	19
Uruguay	4	17
Colombia	4	17
Chile	3	16
Venezuela	3	16

Caribbean

Haiti	40	48
Barbados	39	47
Martinique	31	42
Trinidad	28	41
Surinam (a)	19	35
Guyana (a)	14	32
Jamaica	11	31

Source: ILO estimates from International Labour Office (1977, Vols. I-IV); Revised estimates from Dixon (1983).

- (a) The Dominican Republic has been placed in Central America because of its Spanish heritage; likewise Surinam and Guyana have been placed in the Caribbean because of their non-Spanish background.

Taken from Sarthi Acharya's "Women and Rural Development in the Third World", Tata Institute of Social Science, Bombay.

Table 3

**Division of Labour in 279 African
Agricultural Communities**

	<u>Major part in Cultivation played by</u>				<u>Total</u>
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Equal</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Non- Agriculture</u>	
All Africa	126 (45%)	73 (26%)	71 (25%)	9 (3%)	279 (100%)
Sub-Saharan	124(53%)	59 (26%)	41 (18%)	9 (3%)	232(100%)

Source: University of London 1983, cited by Sarthi Acharya.

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