

Kurukshetra University Golden Jubilee Lecture

**The Indivisible Trinity :
Education, Culture Dynamics and
Participatory Democracy**

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I must thank the Vice Chancellor and Prof. Reicha Tanwar for the honour of being invited to deliver this lecture. As a member of the 'first generation beneficiaries of the equality clauses of India's Constitution' I entered the academic profession in the early 50s. Within a decade my concern for needed reforms in higher education brought me to the UGC Secretariat, in the hope to be a participant in the reforms that were expected to follow the Report of the Indian Education Commission (1960-62). Visiting Universities with UGC Committees provided the best opportunity for Bharat Darshan - but I regret that I never had the good fortune to come to Kurukshetra.

As a student of History, and because of some personal familial experiences, the location of your institution revives certain memories and associations. I had to read the Gita repeatedly to my mother-in-law through her terminal illness in the mid-fifties, and some verses and phrases - which she found a source of strength to cope with her physical distress - remain fixed in my memory.

"Dharmakshetre Kurukshetra Samavetah Yuyutsavah"

Thus Kurukshetra was remembered both as a theatre for war and dharma. My childhood memories however are of elders - especially aunts and older cousins, separating us - the youngsters - from our frequent quarrels while playing - by snappy rebukes *not to turn our childish fracas into a Kurukshetra!*

The cultural association, especially among women, was thus of a **familial conflict - which could only bring tragedy.**

How to explain this dichotomy - between the Gita referring to the place as a *Dharmakshetra*, and women cutting across generations, handing down a memory of a familial tragedy, as a lesson which had to be remembered? Or the persistence of the familial lessons that women and girls had to learn - that we must never damage the integrity and reputation of the family, a lesson that I began to question in my adult days, which coincided with the first decade after the adoption of the Constitution of the Indian Republic. Significantly, my source of support in such questioning came from my father, who was a scientist and a deep believer in the rule of law.

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One of the most peculiar, and persisting disjunctions in Indian social history lies in the **gap between illusion and reality of the relationship between the educational process** - its socio-cultural outcome and women's lives and status. Through the major part of the 19th century and beyond - social reformers and educationists - missionaries and radicals - modernists and traditionalists, related women's low status in Indian society **to their exclusion from the educational process**. By the early decades of the 20th century, women's organisations, and women writers joined this campaign. Nationalist historians of ancient India found evidence of this process of exclusion having begun around the 5th century B.C. - and identified that as one of the major factors contributing to the systematic decline in women's social situation through later periods (R.C. Majumdar, A.S. Altekar).

Nineteenth century Feminist Movements in the West also gave high priority to women's **access to education as the mover and shaker** of their persisting subordinate status in society. Curiously enough, women who passionately believed in this illusion were not themselves uneducated, - on the other hand, many of them could only use that education to earn a precarious and humiliating living as governesses for young girls in the homes of the wealthy, or the still more precarious and risky profession as writers and journalists, often under disguised names. The most fortunate found rewarding self-fulfilment in some form of missionary work - as educators or health professionals - away from the regions of their birth and upbringing.

In the context of colonial India - the reality was very different. Research on the traditional systems of education in vogue in different parts of the country has been tardy, inadequate and biased by the twin forces of patriarchy (among high caste/class groups), and cultural resistance to the new regime. However, the three Presidential Reports on the state of indigenous education in the 1820s do provide evidence that the elementary education available for the hoi polloi **did not** altogether exclude girls (especially in the Madras and Bombay Presidencies). Other sources from the 16th to 18th Century also indicate that a) women within the aristocracy - Hindu, Muslim or otherwise, were often very accomplished women; and b) women in trading occupations or high-skilled professionals (e.g. in textile production) were by no means illiterate. **The richness of India's oral traditions, and the devotional (or radical) poetry of medieval women saints could not have survived across centuries if all women were illiterate.**

Colonial India in the early 19th century could not even dream of democracy, but Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the social reformer - **dared to propagate a policy of mass education through the mother tongue for boys and girls alike**, nearly half a century before Lord Pamerston declared that adult franchise (men only) had made it necessary for the Government of Great Britain 'to educate its own masters'. Amongst the 36 schools established by Vidyasagar during his short span as Education Advisor to the Lt. Governor of the Bengal Presidency - 20 were for girls and 16 for boys. Eighty years later, Gopal Krishna Gokhale introduced a Private Member's Bill for free and compulsory primary education - for boys and girls - within the Imperial Legislative Council. The great educator and university builder, Ashutosh Mukherjee, supported him. When Ashutosh was challenged by some of his admirers, who were afraid that mass education could lead to dilution of academic standards (for which Ashutosh was a flag bearer), he

had answered "Educators have to take care of academic standards. But standards will not rescue the large mass of our population from the darkness of illiteracy and ignorance. **The inertia that sets in from generations of illiteracy has to be removed if this country and its people are to realise their own potential for progress**" (N. K. Sinha, *Biography of Ashutosh*).

On women's education the 19th Century British Raj's escape route (Hunter, 1884) was the same as has been maintained by many of its successor governments after independence -

'Indian society will not permit the same kind of education for its men and women'. Hunter overlooked the fact that in the same year, the Calcutta University's Senate took its historic decision (in response to the application from a single woman seeking permission to sit for the Entrance Examination (matriculation) conducted by the University: 'In the University's regulations governing examinations the word 'he' shall also stand for 'she'. **At that time no British University had taken such a step.** Women's colleges came up in Oxford and Cambridge and London in the last two decades of the 19th century, but except for London University - women were not formally admitted to University degrees for decades thereafter (Oxford 1920s, Cambridge still later). The other Presidency Universities followed the example set by Calcutta University soon thereafter. **In 1917, the Calcutta University Commission (Sadler Commission) received a representation from the University Women's Association that there should be no difference in curricula for women within the University. Difference, however, remained within schools, whether they were funded by the government or by missionary efforts.**

In the post-independence period the policy of non-discrimination in curricula continued to be propagated by women's organisations, and the National Committee on Women's Education (GOI, 1959). The latter however sought a scientific rationale for this demand and recommended the appointment of an expert committee for this purpose. The recommendations of the Hansa Mehta Committee on Differentiation in Curricula Between Boys and Girls (GOI, 1962) providing scientific evidence available at the time, reiterated the policy of non-differentiation. Other national committees on primary and secondary education, conscious of the constitutional mandate, wisely followed the same path.

In comparison, the Radhakrishnan Commission on University Education (1948) adopted a somewhat equivocal position, **by emphasising the home making role of women, calling for different skills and knowledge.** However, possibly again because of the constitutional mandate it also mentioned the wider employment opportunities opening for women in independent India, which would require equipping women with the needed qualifications.

In contrast, the Hansa Mehta Committee (1962) argued for the policy of non-differentiation on **social developmental grounds also.** Subjects like Home Science, Fine Arts etc.,

viewed then by educated middle class society as 'more suitable for women', the Committee argued **'needed to be opened to men also to make them better partners in children's upbringing and household management and to develop their finer creative and aesthetic faculties'**. The Education Commission (1964-66) endorsed this approach and the policy of non-differentiation of curricula found articulation in the National Education Policy Resolution of 1968. **It was however applied only within the higher education sector for which credit has to be given to the UGC then headed by Prof. D.S. Kothari who had also chaired the Education Commission.** ¹

Within school education, however, State Boards of Secondary Education in particular States continued practices of differentiation. Studies conducted by the Indian Association for Women's Studies soon after the National Policy of 1986 **provided ample evidence that even within the Union Territory of Delhi, courses in Science and Mathematics were not available in government higher secondary schools for girls.**

The peculiar divergence between professed policies and their implementation was reflected in patterns of variation in the relative access and performance of men and women at different levels of education. The patterns in higher education, especially **registered marked variations from the patterns observed in Western countries.** Women university students' enrolment and performance in Mathematics and hard sciences kept pace with their relative proportions in total enrolments. In some of the southern universities, Vice Chancellors were often heard to view the overshooting performance of women students in these disciplines as a cause for anxiety and 'possible wastage of national resources'. The Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) noted that in Medicine, women's enrolment in India was second only to that of the Soviet Union. Paradoxically, **this was not reflected in other professional courses - like agriculture, forestry, or technology, making it difficult for the government or voluntary organisations to find qualified women in these disciplines - by the time it was forced to accept that women played major roles as producers as well as consumers in sectors like agriculture, forestry or livestock rearing. Similarly, the technological skills that women required for handicrafts and other cottage industries in the small scale sector, where the largest number of women were engaged, were also not provided to them in industrial training institutes or Polytechnics (especially those only for women).**

The CSWI accused the educational system of evading the challenge of gender equality, and 'a regression from the norms developed during the freedom struggle'. The members of the Committee questioned their own training by that system - that concepts, the theories, the tools for social research - *which had made the lives of the majority of India's women invisible to their educated sisters.*

^{1.} During my years as an officer of the DOC, I had to intercede on several occasions regarding men's claims to study Fine Arts, Music etc. - which were being ruled out by my-Section Officer as 'inadmissible'. My interventions were upheld by the Chairman, Prof. D.S. Kothari.

I have tried to capture this agonized questioning by the CSWI's members (described by a Naga village woman as *honest women* - during the Committee's tour of the North Eastern region) as *the twin crises - of conscience and identity*. Prof. Lotika Sarkar, the originator of the phrase, 'first generation beneficiaries of the equality clauses' - kept emphasizing our appalling ignorance, but invariably followed it with a further question - *whom did we represent*'?

The National Education Policy of 1986 was forced to recognise the scathing critique of sex stereotyping of vocational training by government run polytechnics and other institutions pointed out by the Working Group on Employment of Women (1977-78). The Chairman of that Working Group (late Prof. Asok Mitra) was very active in the dialogue with officials of the Education Ministry during the National Seminar on Education for Women's Equality that preceded the National Policy of 1986.

In January 1985, when the new government of Rajiv Gandhi (brought to office by a massive electoral mandate - in which the women's vote was acknowledged as a major component) announced its decision to formulate a new educational policy, Dr. Madhuri Shah (in her dual persona as Chairman, UGC - nominated and appointed by the Government of India, - and elected President of the Indian Association for Women's Studies) took two steps. **She wrote to the Education Minister demanding a special focus on women's equality within the new policy, and simultaneously called for a joint workshop by experts, education reformers - from within and outside the University system and women's studies specialists, leading the movement for women's studies.**

The recommendations of the seminar on Organisation and Perspectives of Women's Studies Units in Indian Universities (RCWS, 1985) described women's studies as an **"instrument for academic as well as social development" and to "bring the higher education system closer to burning issues of social change"**. It suggested an organisational approach -designating women's studies not as a discipline which required separate institutional arrangements, but as a dimension to be absorbed by various disciplines, cutting across humanities, social and natural sciences and others. These recommendations were incorporated virtually wholesale in the **UGC's guidelines for a Programme of Women's Studies, launched in February 1986, three months before the National Policy on Education was adopted by Parliament.**

Dr. Madhuri Shah's request to the Education Minister had coincided with a similar demand from Dr. Phulrenu Guha, who had served as Chairperson of the Committee on the Status of Women in India and had come back to Parliament in 1985 after a long break -as a member of the ruling party. The national seminar convened by the Education Ministry on Education for Women's Equality thus acquired greater political significance, than many of the other consultations held across the country on various other themes. The recommendations of the national seminar provided the basis for several aspects of the National Policy on Education (1986).

The Literacy Campaigns: Perceived and Unperceived Outcomes

The CSWI's criticism of the failure of the post-independence government on the women's literacy front had been scathing. An analysis of the sex ratio among illiterates demonstrated that **there was no gender gap among them till 1931**. Since then the gap continued to widen, even more in the post-independence period. Paradoxically, **while the gender gap in literacy and elementary education widened, patterns of gender-distribution at the higher education level were different**, not only in comparison with elementary and secondary education in India, but markedly different from women in high education in western countries.

The high priority given to Literacy resulted in the setting up of the National Literacy Mission in 1987 **with the explicit goal of achieving certain social objectives along with eradication of illiteracy**. An Expert Group on Evaluation of literacy campaigns stated seven years later (1994) **that this merging of social objectives had been one of the mission's basic strengths**. The same Expert Group observed that the Total Literacy Campaigns (ILCs) had **succeeded wherever it had assumed the character of a 'social movement' or mainly a women's movement**. **The massive mobilisation of voluntary effort by literacy, developmental and cultural activists - among whom women form a very large section, was one of the most significant achievements of the campaigns.**

Another unanticipated outcome of the heightened focus on women in the literacy campaigns was a steep rise in enrolment of girls as well as boys in primary schools, greater involvement and mobilisation of women into thrift groups/ self-help groups.

Women's Studies and Higher Education

The first National Conference on Women's Studies, 1981, led to the establishment of the Indian Association for Women's Studies. It broadened the base of the movement and took the first step towards **institutionalising the challenge to the educational system**. The appointment of Dr. Madhuri Shah (Chairperson, National Organising Committee for the first National Conference, and the first President of the Indian Association for Women's Studies), as the first woman to chair the University Grants Commission in 1981 led to the initial steps taken by the UGC to encourage the University system to focus on 'issues relating to the status of women' within the universities' teaching, research and curriculum development activities. **Just as the ICSSR had quietly undertaken a sponsored research programme focussing on poor women during the Emergency, the UGC also used its statutory autonomous status to take the first step to draw the attention of the University system to its social responsibilities vis-a-vis women.**

The critical connection between the availability and the character of the educational process and the social construction of gender had been repeatedly acknowledged by historians, social reformers, and the radical discourses on women's education unleashed during the long struggle for freedom from colonial rule as well as in social protests in earlier periods. Some of this lost history has resurfaced during the last few decades through the efforts of women's studies scholars and the response, (though limited) from other sections of the academic community, through the National Policy on Education

laying a mandate on the 'national education system to play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women'.

The CSWI had been shocked that the educational process had made the reality of lives, work, contributions or aspirations of the majority of women invisible to the educated - men and women alike. **Today's women's studies activists have to worry about their own marginalisation within educational structures/institutions/systems. And yet, they have thrived through such challenges - to successfully identify methods, materials, strategies and alliances to transform the connection between the educational process and the social construction of gender - from a negative to a positive one.**

The major outcomes of the concerted pressure from the women's movement and women's studies were:-

- a) a forced debate on the social responsibility of the educational process 'in the development of a new cultural ethos' that can contribute to the realisation of goals of comprehensive human and social by internalising the concern for the equality of women;
- b) promotion of new knowledge about women and their role in development as an instrument for educational and cultural development; and
- c) greater visibility of rural women and women from other disadvantaged groups and their problems vis-a.-vis educational development (GOI, 1985).

The balance sheet on issues of girls education however presents a disturbing contrast and contradiction. The vast apparatus of knowledge production functions to reproduce the same inequalities which it is expected to subvert.

Education, Human Development and Social Dynamics

Education, democracy, development, human rights, human development:- the relationship between these concepts constitute centuries old debates carried within different civilisations and cultures through recorded history. In India, the debate is very old. Principles of pedagogy emphasised education's links with human enlightenment, cultivation of critical rational faculties and their social applications with a sense of responsibility, **even though structurally the social, economic and power systems promoted hierarchy, stratification and exclusion.**

A major contribution of the educational process - before and after independence has been **influencing the social norms of upwardly mobile groups.** M.N. Srinivas' theory of the Sanskritisation Process - with deep roots in the traditional caste hierarchy, - links this upward mobility with adoption of certain social practices of higher caste/status groups with increasing controls over women's labour, mobility and freedoms (Srinivas, 1977).

The greatest indicator of this social dynamics is the **appalling failure of the educational process to control, let alone eradicate dowry. Instead, groups practicing the opposite**

custom of bride-price, changed within a generation to dowry, then to dowry-related violence, even _bride murders. Both education and secure employment (in government, universities, other professions) are bridal qualifications sought after in the marriage market today - not as enhancing the bride's self-confidence or independence - but as assuring the family a higher status with double incomes. Educated professionals (including NRIs) are in high demand as grooms - and offers of "decent marriage" are openly advertised in the national press.

In a diverse, hierarchical and multi-cultural context the issue of women's subordination or status asymmetry has to be understood in terms of inequalities between men and women of the same group and across groups differentiated by inequalities of wealth, knowledge and power.

The women's movement's demand for a positive interventionist role by the national education system was, however, more reflective of the movement's stake **in harnessing this vast social infrastructure, however inadequate and deficient in what it delivered - as a potential and necessary ally, not only for women's advance, but to enable the system as a whole to play a more participatory and conscious role in social and cultural development, and reclaim its value generating quality from which it was being pushed out by the rising role of market forces which view education as a commodity.**

This crisis is not only India's but is a global one, facing education systems all over the world. The influence of market forces has been further aggravated and complicated by the political - ideological battle for control of educational institutions, their curriculum, their funding and their freedoms/autonomy to play a conscious, responsible participatory role in grooming young people to face their future without fear, and as responsible citizens of a democracy, whose ideological foundation rests on the principles of justice, human rights, and equality.

A landmark judgement of the Supreme Court in India (1993) held that the framers of the Constitution made it obligatory for the state to provide education as without education, dignity of the individual cannot be ensured. The Court opined that 'though right to education is not stated expressly as a fundamental right, it flows directly from right to life guaranteed under Article 21. It was further stated that **'the passage of 44 years - more than four times the period stipulated in Article 45 - has converted the 'Obligation created by the article into an enforceable right'**. The Union Government in 1997 proposed the 83rd Constitutional Amendment Bill to make education a fundamental right and provide free and compulsory education to all citizens of the age of 6 to 14 years. The main criticisms against this Bill were that it ignores the pre-school child, and dilutes the right to childhood support services and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) acknowledged by the National Policy (1986). It is also silent on resources needed to make the fundamental right to education justiciable.

The PROBE Report (1999) points out that the rhetoric of education as a fundamental right **goes hand in hand with an unprecedented retreat of the state's commitment to universal elementary education.** The arguments often stress that education is important

for economic growth but the importance of social goals are not clear. Current discourse on school curricula focuses on school education as a form of social control. The pedagogical critique of education places much more emphasis on values than the formal curriculum.

The women's movement rejected the compartmentalisation of issues of women's rights into health, education, employment, reproduction etc. and emphasised their interconnectedness. The increasing involvement and informed pressures from civil society groups and grassroots women's organisations has helped in exploring new pathways but this has to go hand in hand with the redefinition of the state's functions and development planning. **The vision of decentralised governance postulates that planning belongs to the people and not to the technocrats.**

The economic rationale of educational reform has to be reformulated to reflect the values recorded in the Preamble to India's Constitution, especially to grapple with the contemporary global challenge - of a gender asymmetry among the younger sections of the population.

The CSWI had used the 100 year old decline in India's sex-ratio **as an indicator of increasing marginalization of women** in all spheres of social change, and the political failure of India's democracy to abide by the ideology developed during the freedom struggle. Today's problem of the 'missing girl child' is not confined to India or South Asia but is a global phenomenon. The only countries which seem to escape the crimes of doing away with their daughters are the least developed or the poorest countries of the world - 34 in Africa, 9 in Asia; 1 in Latin America and the Caribbean and 5 in Oceania.²

² World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision, Vol. II, Sex and Age Distribution of Population, UN, NY 2003, UN Secretariat, Dept. of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division).