

EDUCATION, DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION: CONTEMPORARY DEBATES IN INDIA*

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The role of education in women's liberation is currently the subject of several debates in India. In fact, the debates spring from another general debate which has been going on for a long time, on the role of education in the achievement of social justice. Till 1975 the specific role of education in the attainment of women's equality was not being debated. The concept of education as a pre-requisite for women's equality had been accepted for well over a century, and was in fact the first demand of the earlier women's movement that developed during the nineteen twenties and thirties. In the post-independence period national policy again accepted education as the *key* instrument to translate the constitutional guarantee of equal status and opportunities for women into reality. Most national agencies responsible for educational development tended to regard women's educational need as a special responsibility. The University Grants Commission liberalised its conditions to increase assistance to colleges catering exclusively to women. Several state governments made education of girls free, not only within the school system but even upto the university. Quite a few teacher training colleges for women also provided free training to expand the number of women in the teaching profession. The National Committee on Women's Education, appointed by the Government of India (1958-59) identified certain major problems and advised the government to focus its policy and programme efforts on reducing the gap between men and women within the educational process, and to eliminate any differentiation of curricula between the two sexes.

However, the assessment made by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1971-74) *recorded a major failure of these efforts*. Not only had the country failed to eradicate illiteracy among women. The number of women illiterates and their proportion amongst total illiterates had in fact increased during the decades after independence.¹ The major section of children not at school consisted of girls. The most damaging finding of the Committee was that in the realm of social values and attitudes to women's roles, the educational system had not succeeded in bringing any major change. On the other hand, it had helped to strengthen and perpetuate traditional ideas of women's subordination.²

The debates begun since the publication of that report, have become more vehement with the revitalisation of the women's movement. The aim of this paper is to present some of the crucial debates, the contextual setting which gave them birth, and to challenge some myths that seek to mystify the education and development scene vis-a-vis the quest for women's liberation.

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There are, in fact, three major debates: (a) Has education, instead of eliminating women's unequal roles and position in society - widened gender inequality adding a new one - between educated and uneducated women?; (b) Should education policy, which upheld non-discrimination/non-differentiation on grounds of sex be altered now - find a change more valuable?; and (c) Should education play a more prominent and activist role to eliminate gender inequality and if so, how? Who should be its target?

Each of these debates, often presented in strictly statistical and educational terms, hides a political controversy. The women's movement's stand is unequivocal. The Indian freedom struggle adopted gender and social equality as the founding principle of the Indian political system. Four decades later, women activists cannot support any attempts to reverse that principle. Education, along with legal reform and equal political and civil rights, had been seen as the major instruments to translate that principle into reality. Education's achievement has been mixed, like all other development policies. Goals were not clearly defined, ambiguities and mystification abounded, providing cover for reactionary elements. Social goals inevitably received lower priority before economic ones, unless there was organised pressure to demand otherwise. *And for three decades after independence the women's movement was absent from the political arena, so the education system, or the Government behind that system, cannot be solely blamed for all the failures and mistakes.*

This does not mean that they can be absolved of all responsibility. Apart from the constitutional directives, there were many policy directions - Five Year Plans, National Commissions and Committees, Parliamentary Resolutions - that set goals, to eliminate gender differences in access to education and in content of education. Courts upheld the right of women to enter any educational institution, and except for the Army, no profession could be debarred to women. *The ratio of women to men in higher education³ today can stand comparison with the most developed countries of the world. Women have held decision-making positions in the educational bureaucracy since independence, have always received equal pay, and have also enjoyed some special privileges on the logic of being a 'weaker section'.* These privileges included special weightage or reserved quota in admissions to some courses, special grants to institutions which catered exclusively to women's educational needs e.g. training in sciences, for hostels etc. free education at school and teacher training in many states.

But all these achievements pale into insignificance in the face of the statistics of illiteracy. *75 per cent of women still remain illiterate, and during 1971-81 the sex-ratio (number of women per one thousand men) among illiterates changed from 1330 to 1427! This ratio becomes still higher in regions with higher educational development.* For rural India it is 1412, but it is 1523 for urban areas. In Kerala, the most educationally advanced state, with a female illiteracy rate of less than 35 per cent, the urban sex-ratio among illiterates is 1930. The nine states recently classified by the Government of India as specially backward in women's education, however, have illiteracy sex-ratios lower than the national average in some cases.

Efforts to use illiteracy sex-ratios as an indicator of increasing gender differentiation with educational development began only since 1980. Similar data regarding non-school goers is being used to demand special programmes to increase girls' enrolment in schools. A recently concluded conference by Women NGOs drew pointed attention to the fact that 55 per cent of girls in the 6-11 age group, seventy-five per cent in the 11-14

age group and 85 per cent in the 14-17 age group are still out of school. Comparable figures for boys are twenty per cent, 57 per cent and 71 per cent.

These figures all tell the same story. The gender gap reduces as you go up the education ladder, but widens among the entire population which fails to get access to the educational process. So education has both reduced and widened the gender gap among different levels of the population. The issue is therefore primarily of class. The assumption that Indian women are deprived of education because of purdah, or social seclusion, does not hold good any longer because the sections that confined their women to the home have taken the lead in educating them - (a) because otherwise they could not find a suitable groom; and (b) to push them into the labour market when necessary to maintain or improve the family's standards of living.⁴

The classes that have been left out are : (a) whose women were always in the labour force (36 per cent of the agricultural work force are women) either as family labour or as wage labour, as their families could not survive without the women's economic contribution; (b) aspirant or new entrants into the rank of the middle class, who tend to emulate the traditional norms of the social elite - of controlling their women by confining them to the home; and (c) the downwardly mobile families, among whom women's labour under disguised, exploited conditions is often responsible for the difference between survival and extinction.

When women labour, daughters are needed as helpers, and even the presence of a school nearby cannot bridge the gap without supportive services. Peasant women's work day has been found to extend to fourteen to eighteen hours. As against this, men average between eight to ten hours. Hence the demand for special programmes :

- i. of childcare centres attached to schools;
- ii. of improved supply of water, fuel, fodder;
- iii. of income generation strategies as entry points to adult and school education for women;
- iv. of expansion of women teachers; and
- v. of supplementary nutrition for school children, through mid-day meals, book and uniform grants and retention scholarships.

The demand for these special programmes mounted during the Decade, resulting eventually in some of them being initiated by the Government from 1983. The demand for childcare centres as an extension of schools, however, has been resisted all along by the Educational administration, on the ground that this will impose a tremendous burden on teachers. A recently concluded National Seminar on Education for Women's Equality attempted a compromise, by recommending that childcare centres should be located near schools, to enable the older children to leave their siblings there and undertake occasional supervision.

Above all there is a demand for vigilant monitoring of these supports by NGOs, because previous experience indicates that *greater resistance to promotion of women's development is at the local level. Rural India which has accepted the vote as a political right, and is familiar with*

the notion of workers rights, is still unaware of women's and children's rights. Only pressure from the top, earmarked allocations, and NGO pressure could change this. But NGO pressure has been lacking so far because women's organisations have been mainly urban, middle class based. Rural women's organisations, which were promoted under the Community Development Programme from the fifties, declined because of lack of official support.

The Working Group on Adult Education Programmes for Women (1977-78), and many conferences on adult literacy since then have advocated the use of such programmes to raise women's awareness of their legal rights. Amazingly, however, educational authorities have never implemented this. On the other hand, non-formal training programmes for women (initiated by the Central Social Welfare Board) whose syllabus since the sixties had included legal rights - actually omitted that part in the training.⁵

The problem of women's illiteracy and ways of eradicating it has also provoked a great deal of debates. *The failure or non-implementation of government sponsored programmes for adult literacy was sometimes rationalised by charges of women's lack of motivation. Researchers on women and women activists have retorted to this by pointing to poor women's lack of time as the primary obstacle to their attending literacy classes.* The struggle for survival does make literacy a low priority for these women. *Activists promoting organisations of poor women have, however, found that while the women give first priority to increasing their earning capacity, they do ask for literacy and other educational inputs fairly soon as they begin to realise their importance to protect themselves against exploitation and to obtain needed information or assistance.* The Working Group on Adult Education Programmes for Women had therefore recommended combining literacy programmes with organisation building and income generation. While some voluntary organisations have actually developed this kind of a package for their work among poor women, government sponsored programmes have found it virtually impossible to integrate these different approaches, *because income generation is not the responsibility of educational agencies.*

The difficulty of coordinating the development assistance offered by different government agencies has created problems for many voluntary organisations engaged in women's development. One of the by-products of the women's movement, however, has been a revival of interest in eradicating women's illiteracy amongst women's organisations. A group of them have now formed a National Committee for Eradication of Female Illiteracy by the year 2000. The Committee has been engaged in dialogues with government agencies to provide a better channel for coordinated assistance so that literacy and educational inputs can be combined with other services which would enable poor working women to cross the barrier of illiteracy. The recent document of the government of India to initiate a national debate for a new educational policy indicates that the government has also begun to realise that unless adult literacy programmes are coordinated with economic development programmes, the target of eradicating illiteracy before the end of the century will not be achieved.

The second debate is still muted because national policy has repeatedly rejected curricular differentiation. *The British Raj had followed a policy of differentiated curricula between men and women. Resistance to this came from educated women and from some universities. In the post-independence period, the controversy was settled by its rejection - by an Expert Committee⁶, and the Education Commission.⁷ But State Secondary Education Boards continue to advocate home science and fine arts rather than mathematics for girls, and get away*

with it because no one is monitoring such matters. Vigilance from the women's movement has also been slow.

The revival of the movement in the late seventies, from the beginning was confused by issues of growing violence against women, and their marginalisation in the economy, to have time to devote to curricular deviations. Demands for vocational training mounted, along with criticism of over concentration of training in household crafts, tailoring, embroidery, handicrafts etc. *Growing realisation of the importance of educated skills, for information gathering, project planning and implementation, and for dialogues and battles with the bureaucracy however, is drawing women NGOs closer to understanding some of the subtle ways by which educational institutions can discriminate. At the same time, the value of information from women's studies specialists in academic institutions is drawing them closer to NGOs⁸, for mobilising pressure on Government for needed policies.*

New contacts with women at grassroots, and the articulation of major grassroot organisations are bringing up new demands. Women want to know their rights under law - why were they not informed all this time? And would it be enough to teach this only to women? Why have not educational authorities recognised all these years that rural women working in agriculture need and want knowledge about better farming methods, sericulture, pisciculture, animal husbandry etc., rather than childcare and nutritional techniques which most of them cannot afford?

The basic assumption that has mystified, and defeated the policy of non-discrimination in content, or curricula is the view that all women are primarily housewives. This middle class bias vitiated earlier programmes for rural women's educational development by loading curricula with things only wealthy women could afford. The efforts of researchers and some NGOs in the last decade, and above all, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India has helped to reduce this myth somewhat, but it is still an uphill battle - to teach educators that they must adopt a participatory approach, that adult women cannot be treated as irresponsible children, that one can teach them only by accepting their priorities, and is also willing to learn from them also.

What the educators have failed to learn, however, a small section of the bureaucracy responsible for agriculture or rural development is being forced to learn through other sources. The National Commission on Agriculture (1976), and the National Committee on Women's Role in Agriculture and Rural Development agreed that *non-recognition of women's major role in agriculture, and failure to reach better knowledge, techniques and tools to women is one of the factors responsible for slow progress in improving agricultural productivity. Simultaneously, groups analysing population policy successes or failures were reaching the conclusion that the key lay in changing women's role and status. They began to press for policies for women's development through employment, health and education to arrest their 'devaluation to mere reproductive machines'⁹.*

About the same time, i.e. *in the seventies, rural women in the Himalayan region precipitated a protest movement against the denudation of their forests for industrial development - shattering another myth - that women in general, and rural women in particular, are just passive spectators of events, who need to be motivated by those who know better, as to what is good for them. New research studies have also discovered women's active role in peasant and workers struggles, during contemporary periods or the past.*

In 1975, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India documented, with official data - the process of marginalisation of women in the economy and society that had started earlier, but had actually been accelerated during the period of planned development since independence. The Committee's critique of Government's policies raised several fundamental questions. *Why had the Constitutional guarantees of equality made so little impact on planners, administrators and local governments? Why had the entire community of social scientists, busy analysing different aspects of social change, failed to examine what was happening to the majority of women, even though census after census was reporting very disturbing things - the declining sex-ratio in the population and economic participation, the rapid rise in female migration, the widening gender gap in mortality and life expectancy, and the rising number of women illiterates? Why had the efforts to bridge the enrolment gap between boys and girls, speeded up in the sixties, after the Report of the National Committee on Women's Education, been allowed to slow down from the late sixties? Above all, why were there so many manifestations of "regression from the norms developed during the Freedom Struggle" - escalation of dowry, greater resistance to the idea of gender equality among many sections of the population, and total apathy among planners and administrators? Why had political parties or trade unions, or elected representatives of the people, or voluntary organisations taken no note of these trends?*

The trends were glaringly visible, not only from the available data, but from the Committee's conversations with nearly 10,000 women from different classes, occupations, communities and regions across the country. *It was obvious to the Committee that no one had, in fact, ever asked women about their problems, needs, priorities or views. Political and legal rights had failed to reach, most women did not know of their rights, or were unable to exercise them effectively.*

As for education - it had failed both in terms of outreach and impact, in quantity and quality, in methods and in content. Flying against the current approaches that seek to reduce education to a mere skill generating process, *the Committee on the Status of Women in India fell back on the classical theory of the role of education :*

"The deep foundations of the inequality of the sexes are built in the minds of men and women through a socialization process which continues to be extremely powerful. Right from their earliest years, boys and girls are brought up to know that they are different from each other and this difference is strengthened in every way possible - through language forms, modes of behaviour, of labour etc. The only institution which can counteract the effect of this process 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".¹⁰

This challenge provides the basis for the third debate. The women's movement, and a section of people within academic institutions - men and women - are questioning the actual contribution of education to social development. Dowry was supposed to disappear with the spread of education. Instead dowry escalation has followed educational development. Higher the education and its labour market value, higher is the groom's price in the marriage market. From ill-treatment of brides who carried

small dowries, we have moved to dowry murders and dowry suicides. *Domestic violence has reared its ugly head among the educated classes, eve teasing is becoming a significant phenomenon in university campuses of metropolitan cities, and it is the educated middle class which is now accused of using women, not excluding women from their own families, as commodities to assist the family's climb up the social ladder.*

It is in this context that the revival of the women's movement is taking place, spearheaded by educated middle class women - young and old, from affluent and hard up families, with or without a general political ideology. It is, as yet, a confused mass of various groups, but certain trends are significant. *The walls of class interests are being scaled on occasions.* The first major explosion in 1979-80 took place because two policemen raped a young agricultural labourer from the scheduled caste. *New organisations of poor working women like SEWA,¹¹ WWF¹² have demonstrated that with a little support from educated women - as correspondents, accountants, trainers, basically support groups - such organisations can even upset established power balances.* Partial success in bringing policy change or legislative reform is making many women's groups realise that they can exercise more political power than they had realised. *And, some of them are coming to acknowledge that they have potential allies - within the government, the media, the judiciary, academia, political parties, trade unions, student groups etc.*

Women's studies or investigation of women's situation at grassroots has played a major role in feeding this ferment, and pressurising the Government for better policies. This movement began with the research commissioned by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) for the Committee on the Status of Women in India. It was sustained through the ICSSR's decision to initiate a sponsored programme of research on women, focussing on the impact of economic development, social change and population dynamics on hitherto neglected groups of "invisible" working women in the informal section (including agriculture), with a view to suggesting policy corrections, and re-examining the theoretical perspectives and analytical tools of the social sciences. *Another objective of the ICSSR's programme was to stimulate a reopening of the social debate on the women's question "which had faded out of the public arena in the period after independence".¹³*

Increasing interest in women's issues among the academic community resulted in the formation of an Association for Women's Studies, and the holding of national/regional Conferences. The close interrelationship between the growth of women's studies or research on women, the revitalisation of the women's movement and the growth of a pressure lobby to struggle for policy changes, has led to its description *"as the intellectual arm of the women's movement, as a powerful instrument which is not value neutral but works actively to transform values in favour of women, as the essential instrument to provide needed information for policy change, as an instrument that transforms women's perceptions about themselves and tries to transform perspectives about women".¹⁴*

The ICSSR had suggested re-examination of social science theories and analytical tools in the light of the findings from research on women, with a view to explain the previous neglect of women in research - e.g. on the economics and sociology of agriculture, studies on the informal sector and studies on poverty, unemployment and equality. The first National Conference on Women's Studies in 1981 challenged the non-inclusion of data on women, and women's issues and concerns in most of the university courses, and suggested revision of university curriculum. This trend in the women's studies movement has been aptly described as women's "growing involvement with the politics

of knowledge”, forcing scholars to assault the “sacred cows of learning”; “the long entrenched Social Darwinists, whose hierarchical view on the universe has served mainly the patriarchs, racists and captains of industry; the historians who for far too long have been permitted to reconstruct a past devoid of women; the economists with their myopic view of labour, or whose theory of growth proclaiming the magic of the marketplace for decades has so disastrously deluded so much of the Third World”.¹⁵

As an outcome of this pressure, the University Grants Commission requested universities to consider ways of incorporating women’s problems, issues and concerns in the teaching, research and extension type of activities of various disciplines. The continued dialogue within the academic community has now produced a set of aims and objectives for incorporating women’s studies within the university system.

1. To change the present attitudes/values in society regarding women’s roles, and rights, to one of equal participation in all social, economic and political processes and national and international development.
2. To promote awareness among women and men, of the need to develop and utilise women’s full potential as resources for national development in its economic, political and socio-cultural aspects, of the need to question existing values and of their social responsibilities so as to participate equality.
3. To counter the 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*.
4. *To revitalise university education, bringing it closer to burning social issues, to work towards their solution, and to produce sensitive persons able to play more committed and meaningful roles in development activities for women in all sectors.*
5. To fulfil a special responsibility - to produce for all levels of the educational system, teachers who are aware of the need for a non-sexist education, and who would actively pick up the challenge to promote values of social equality, including gender equality, secularism, socialism and democracy.
6. To update university curricula by incorporating the results of new scholarship and the issues raised by the latter as they challenge some of the established theories, analytical concepts and methodologies of various disciplines.
7. To promote increased collaboration between different disciplines in teaching, curriculum designing, research and extension activities since women’s studies are interdisciplinary by nature.
8. To generate new and organic knowledge through intensive field work. This would help generation of data essential for evaluation and correction of development policies and programmes and in extending the areas for academic analysis, into hitherto neglected sectors. *For better understanding and investigation of problems being experienced by women at the grass-roots, a closer contact between institutions of higher education and groups directly involved in action; to assist women to enjoy their rights within the family, the community and at work, would be very*

valuable. Such contacts would also help universities and colleges to design their extension activities in a more meaningful manner.

9. *To contribute to the global debate on the women's question through rediscovery of the debate in India - from ancient to contemporary periods, through research and translation from Indian literature including folk literature.*¹⁶

Since the beginning of 1985, there has been a national debate to develop a new education policy. The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Education, Government of India, sponsored a National Seminar on Education for Women's Equality in early November 1985. The seminar discussions were focussed on two basic issues - of women's access to all levels of education, and the role of education in transforming values and attitudes. The report of the seminar articulates very clearly that "incorporation of women's lives, problems and perspectives as a legitimate area of concern, scientific enquiry and understanding within various disciplines, courses and faculty offers a method and an instrument for transforming the role of the educational system to one of active promotion of new values".¹⁷

This debate has shifted the perception of the women's issue in education from one of discrimination against a deprived group, to *recognising it as an instrument for educational reform, to make education a vital instrument for national development, and for the creation of a new kind of social order*. The most significant aspect of this debate, however, is the challenge that the women's movement is putting before education as an institutionalised process. It is no longer a demand for women to be allowed entry into the system as it stands today, but a demand to change the nature, objectives and organisational structure of the system. Women's studies activists are well aware that it is not going to be an easy or a short-term process. Academia is as reluctant to change as any other established system, but it cannot remain indifferent for long to such challenges, if only for its own survival.¹⁸

Table - I

**Number of illiterate female population in India
and its proportion in total illiterate population**

| Year | Female Illiterates (in millions) | Percent to total illiterate |
|-------------|---|--|
| 1951 | 156 | 53.24 |
| 1961 | 185 | 55.55 |
| 1971 | 215 | 55.44 |
| 1981 | 242 | 56.97 |

Notes

- 1 See Table I in Appendix.
- 2 Towards Equality, Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Govt. of India, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, New Delhi, December 1974, Chapter-VI, Paras 6. 108-111.
- 3 During the Decade 1971-81, the number of women for every 1000 men in higher education increased from 294 to 382 (27.64%), Sciences - over 40%, Medicine - 354/1000, Law 75, Eng./Tech. - 47, Agr. - 36, Vet. Science - 45.
- 4 Towards Equality, op cit., Chapter-VI, Imbalance in Educational Development.
- 5 Kumud Sharma, et. al., Women in Focus, Sangam Books (India) Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1984, p.80.
- 6 Committee on Differentiation of Curricula for Boys and Girls, Government of India, Ministry of Education, 1964.
- 7 Education and National Development, Report of the Indian Education Commission, 1966, Government of India, Ministry of Education.
- 8 Many Women's Studies specialists are activists in the women's movement, and have joined, or promoted organisations to work for a better deal for women.
- 9 ICSSR, Advisory Committee on Women's Studies - Critical Issues on the Status of Women : Priorities for Action, 1977.
- 10 See, 2 above.
- 11 Self-Employed Women's Association, Ahmedabad.
- 12 Working Women's Forum, Madras.
- 13 ICSSR, Policy Statement of the Programme on Women's Studies.
- 14 Samya Shakti, Vol. II, No. 1, 1985, CWDS (Editorial).
- 15 Lucille Mair, International Women's Decade : A Balance Sheet, Third J.P. Naik Memorial Lecture 1984, CWDS.
- 16 Report of the Seminar on Perspectives and Organisation of Women's Studies Units in Indian Universities, April 1985, Department of Political Science, Delhi University, p. 3-4
- 17 Report of the National Seminar on Education for Women's Equality, November 1985, CWDS (mimeo).
- 18 National Policy on Education (1986) contained a section on Education for Equality, which began with on Education for Equality, which began with major recommendations of the 1985 Seminar.