EDUCATION FOR WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Dr.Somika Sinha

ABSTRACT

Research on women in India is not new. In fact, the debate on the status and conditions of women in the social reform movement and the nationalist movement has provided considerable impetus to the research on women. Social reformers, revivalists and also the liberals regarded education of women as an instrument for changing their subordinated status in the society. Thus the paper emphasizes upon several efforts which were made in the pre independent and the post independent period to provide education for women in India.

It then tries to explore the present scenario in the context of education for women. There has been a blending of academic research with action in various forums to influence public policy and public opinion in order to improve the status and conditions of women in the present times. The Towards Equality Report has pointed out that education has both reduced and widened the gender gap among different levels of the population.

Thus the paper brings to the forefront several debates and challenges confronting women's education in the contemporary times. It also raises few questions on the basis of some case studies in this direction. Finally, it proposes that we need to address the issues mentioned and find answers to the questions raised in the paper.

Keywords: education, social reform movement, women, gender equality, public policy,

Introduction

Research on women in India is not new (Patel, 1998). In fact, the debate on the status and conditions of women in the social reform movement and the nationalist movement has provided considerable impetus to the research on women (Mazumdar and Sharma, 1979). In the early 19th century the social reform movement attempted to ameliorate the conditions and status of women, particularly those who belonged to the higher castes. The social reformers were the first to challenge the traditional subordination of Hindu women (Desai 1977). Within the framework of Hindu revivalism they fought to give women some degree of dignity and status but they continued to emphasize upon the patriarchal ideals of Hindu women as self-sacrificing, selfless, and submissive wives and mothers (Patel, 1998).

Social reformers, revivalists and also the liberals regarded education of women as an instrument for changing their subordinated status in the society. There was considerable debate on education for women among the social reformers with different ideological orientations. Cultural revivalists perceived women as the custodians of the tradition and the family. Women's education was seen essentially as a means of strengthening traditional Indian culture and values to resist westernization. The liberal social reformers advocated limited education for girls to make them enlightened companions for the emergent class of westernized men from upper castes and efficient mothers for the next generation. Thus, education for women was promoted to improve their traditional roles within the patriarchal family. Social reformers neither envisaged women's education as a means to equip them for playing a wider role in society nor emphasized the liberating potential of education to question the patriarchal oppression. Hence, the social reform movement opened up access to schooling for girls and women from the upper castes but the differences in access to the kinds and levels of knowledge remained throughout the colonial period (Patel, 1998).

However, the contribution of the social reform movement in improving women's education cannot be underestimated. The efforts of social reformers along with the missionaries paved the way for the development of public female education in the early 19th century and provided impetus to the emergence of a group of educated women such as social workers, teachers,

academics and doctors who later on became the vanguard of the early women's movement (Gandhi and Shah, 1991).

During 1880-1930, the social reform movement also became instrumental in the growth of women's organizations mostly in urban areas. But the focus of the women's movement during this period was on improving the status of women within the ideological framework of Hindu revivalists and the emerging class of Western educated intelligentsia (Everett, 1979).

Social Reform Movement and the Nationalist Movement

The merging of the social reform movement with the nationalist movement for independence brought a marked shift in the perspective on women's issues. The democratic ideology of the nationalist movement and the need to broaden the political base of the nationalist struggle contributed to the acceptance of the principles of equality of rights, status, and opportunities for participation in the process of national development (Mazumdar and Sharma, 1979). It was the increased political participation of women in the freedom struggle from the 1920s onwards that called for fundamental redefinition of gender roles.

Mahatma K. Gandhi, the leader of India's non-violent freedom struggle, played an important role in channelzing the energies of the emerging women's movement into the nationalist movement. Gandhi's view on women synthesized the Hindu ideology on women with liberal Western ideology on 'equality' in the public sphere (Patel, 1998). Like social reformers, Gandhi perceived women as the oppressed group and opposed social customs like early marriage, dowry, *purdah* and so on that subordinated them. He envisaged a significant role for women in Indian society and advocated gender equality in legal, educational, social, and political spheres. To expand the mass-base of the nationalist movement, Gandhi made possible the involvement of women in politics. However, Gandhi's reconstruction of Indian women and feminism was not based on the deeper structural analysis of the origin and nature of gender subordination (Patel 1988). Hence, Gandhi reaffirmed their traditional role in the family as wife and mother and did not assign any significance to women's productive role within the family or the economy. Thus, Gandhi projected women as the potential vanguard of the non-violent process of social and

political transformation without questioning fundamental structures of patriarchy. Although Gandhi favoured female education for all sections of society, he too advocated women's education to improve their traditional roles as wives and mothers in the patriarchal family (Patel, 1998).

The Post Independent Scenario

There has been a shift in emphasis and approaches to understand the changing roles and status of women in the broader context of Indian society in the post independent period. In general, women have been historically excluded from mainstream knowledge production. The knowledge that women possessed was either not acknowledged or not given legitimacy. However, during the past two decades, there has been tremendous expansion in research, scholarship, and action related to women's issues in India. In the early 1970s there was a revival of interest in research on women and this can be attributed to a large-scale research project on the status of Indian women in the context of the International Women's Decade (Patel, 1998). Subsequently, the alarming findings of the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Towards Equality (Government of India 1974), contributed to the emergence of several streams of new scholarship and influenced research on women sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Sciences Research (ICSSR) and a few other agencies (Mazumdar and Sharma, 1979).

The Women's Studies Research Centers and Women's Studies Cells in the university system has been established and thus women's studies has become an integral part of the institutionalized system of higher learning (Patel, 1998). Women's studies in India strive to promote equality, justice, and liberation through knowledge. While engaging in the 'politics of knowledge', women's studies in India has not only made women visible to development planning and academic scholarship but has also broadened the horizons of knowledge to help understand the forces that marginalize women in Indian society (Sharma, 1992).

Like in other parts of the world, women's studies in India have contributed new understandings in the fields of economics, history, sociology, and, particularly, development planning (Patel, 1998). The major contribution of women's studies in the earlier phase was making women's

issues academically visible and shifting the research agenda from the concerns of women from upper castes and middle classes to the needs and problems of poor women. The overriding concern of research in the earlier phase of women's studies was on population policy and planning and the issues of poverty, unemployment, inequality, and strategies for survival (Mazumdar, 1987).

Women's studies have also significantly contributed to the ongoing critique of dominant approaches to development from the feminist perspective. To some extent, such critique has succeeded in generating interest in women's studies among development planners and in integrating some of the needs and concerns of women for full employment and distributive justice into development planning. In addition, women's studies has also reinterpreted the contributions of women to history and highlighted their substantial role in the creation of culture (Mazumdar, 1987).

By integrating theory and praxis, women's studies in India aims at promoting gender equality and justice by producing relevant knowledge that leads to action. It is based on the premise that knowledge is not "value-neutral". It is an instrument for domination as well as transformation. Hence, women's studies is aptly described 'as the intellectual arm of the women's movement' not only for changing state policies, but also for transforming women's perceptions about themselves. Women's studies has also brought to the forefront their perspectives and knowledge and used this knowledge for intervention while mobilizing poor women (Mazumdar, 1987). It has reclaimed the history of women's protests and struggles in larger movements and made women's activism a legitimate area of enquiry in social sciences (Patel, 1998).

Present Trends in Education for Women

An equally important aspect of women's studies has been blending academic research with action in various forums to influence public policy and public opinion in order to improve the status and conditions of women (Patel, 1998). In India, there is a close linkage between women's studies and the women's movement. Women activists and academics have worked together to redefine knowledge. Women's groups have played a vital role in the expansion of knowledge and

generation and dissemination of information. Activists from women's groups and organizations are also active participants in all public forums pertaining to women's studies. They have made a significant contribution by giving expression to the silent voices of ordinary women and integrating their concerns into the research agenda of women's studies. They also have played an important role in articulating the need for developing feminist methodology on the basis of experiences of the women's movement in order to understand the social reality of women at the grassroots (Gladstone 1994).

Women's studies have also striven to break the isolation of academia and learn from the experiences of others. This is evident from the close involvement of many academics with the activities of the women's movement. Research inputs of women's studies have also enriched the women's movement by providing conceptual and analytical tools to interpret forms and mechanisms of women's oppression (Pandhe 1988).

Women's groups and organizations working at various levels also look to alternative knowledge produced by women's studies to develop strategies for empowering women. Thus, women's studies in India contains the potential of bringing substantial change to the position of women by linking academic visibility of women's issues with political action. With the growth of women's studies, however, opinions have become divided regarding its role and focus. Women activists fear that the excessive academicization of women's studies will alienate it from the women's movement. On the other hand, women's studies scholars are apprehensive that excessive preoccupation with action can lead to the dilution of scientific endeavour. Instead of acting as a catalyst to change all disciplines and shake the foundations of existing knowledge, it could be marginalized as a discipline in the university system (Patel, 1998).

Women's studies have made an important contribution to understanding how gender socialization and discriminatory practices adversely affect educational participation by women. The Towards Equality Report was the first one to draw the attention of educational planners to how education has both reduced and widened the gender gap among different levels of the population (Government of India 1974). Mazumdar (1987) has identified three debates on women's education which have emerged since the publication of this landmark Report. The first debate

shows how education has contributed to widening gender inequality instead of eliminating women's unequal roles and position in Indian society and has created a new division between educated and uneducated women. The second debate revolves around the issue of continuation of curricular differentiation in educational institutions despite the policy of non-discriminatory curricula. Finally, the third debate challenges the role of education in promoting social development among women. The problems of dowry, domestic violence, and eve-teasing (verbal sexual harassment of women and girls) have not disappeared but in fact have prevailed among the educated middle class.

Within the framework of the third debate the paper raises few questions on the basis of few case studies on women.

Case Study 1

Buddhan Devi, a dalit illiterate women of Shekhwara village of the Bodh gaya block stood for the election of the Zila Parishad in 2001. She could not win the election but she didn't lose the zeal also. She said 'let me just win the election then I will show what can a daughter of a dalit do for her people.' Women of the village had full faith in Bhudhan Devi that she will work for them when she will win the election (interview with Bhudhan Devi and Focused Group Discussion with women on 9th February, 2009 in Shekhwara village, Bodh Gaya, Bihar as a part of field work for Ph.D).

This case study compels us to rethink the definition of education. What do we actually mean by being educated? It means literacy or awareness and consciousness as Budhan Devi and other women were not literate but they were all aware of the situation and the problems of the village and were also conscious of getting them eliminated. They were all vocal and bold to put forward their views.

Case Study 2

Poonam Kumari, who was uneducated and was a daughter of a daily wage labourer Manoj Choudhry refused to marry a drunken groom on the day of the marriage. The marriage ceremony was being solemnized in a local temple in the Phulwarisharif Block premises near Patna. The

villagers, bride's family and the community members were stunned. It came as an example set by an uneducated girl in the present day Bihar. Dilnawaz Ahmad, DSP Phulwarisharif said that though the groom's father was ready to tender a written apology and promise that his son would never touch liquor in future, the bride remained firm on her decision and even threatened to commit suicide if forced to marry the drunken boy (Kumar, Avinash, (18th February, 2009), Hindustan Times.

This case study raises the question on the role of education in the development of the personality of an individual. Poonam Kumari was uneducated but she could exercise her choice and take a bold decision about an important matter of her life. Many women who are well educated are not in a position to take this bold step. This shows the lack of development of personality of educated women and raises the question that do we need to reform the present education system of our country or include few curriculum which would help in the development of the personality of the individual.

Conclusion

Since the mid-1980s, the debate on women's education has shifted from gender discrimination in education to using the education system to promote new values and a new kind of social order. The challenge before women's studies is to change the institutionalized processes and organizational structures of the existing system of education (Patel, 1998). On the other hand, the influence of women's studies on mainstream educational research has remained very limited. A descriptive study of educational research during 1950-1983 shows that though gender was used as one of the independent variables in several studies, research on women's education from the feminist perspective was very limited (Usha Devi, 1992).

The International Decade for Women (1975-1985) provided some impetus to research on women's education but the research on women's education was dominated by conventional normative and descriptive surveys and seldom reflected feminist perspectives. Women's studies has neither taken up women's education as a priority area nor succeeded in influencing mainstream educational research. Though feminist scholarship on women's education has grown

over the years yet it has remained on the fringe of women's studies and mainstream educational research. In the 1990s, the challenge before women's studies is to search for an alternative paradigm that gives expression to the plurality and diversity of women's experiences and empowers women to gain autonomy and collective strength in order to change their social reality (Patel, 1998).

Women activists and academics have emphazised on the transformation of the existing intellectual tradition which has also contributed to maintaining patriarchal social relations. The key challenge facing women's studies is how to blend research and action and also theory and practice without losing its broader political goals against the twin danger of excessive academicization and activism. In the 1990s, women's studies face the challenging task of pursuing its goals of gender equality and social justice in the context of globalization and liberalization. Until now, women's studies have survived in the university system with the financial support and patronage of the government and donor agencies. However, the further growth and sustainability of women's studies research centers and cells are constrained by the present fiscal crisis in higher education. The institutionalization of women's studies is in danger of losing its transformative and critical role because of the rigidities of the university system. Thus, in the changing context it remains to be seen to what extent the committed academic community can pursue knowledge that transforms policies and builds perspectives to empower women (Patel, 1998).

Thus in a way of conclusion it can be said that we need to address the issues mentioned above and to find an answer to the questions raised in the paper regarding the status of women and their education in India in contemporary times.

A Quarterly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories
Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gage, India as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A.

International Journal of Research in Social Sciences
http://www.ijmra.us

416

References :

[1] Agnihotri,I. and Mazumdar,V. 1995, *Changing Terms of Political Discourse: Women's Movement in India. 1970s-1990,* Economic and Political Weekly, 30(29), pp.1869-1878.

[2] Gladstone, M. (1994), *Feminist Research Methodology from Women's Movement Experiences,* Bulletin of Madras Development Seminar Series, 24(11), pp. 470-479.

[3] Government of India, (1974), *Towards Equality,* Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, New Delhi, Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare.

[4] J.M. Everett., (1979). *Women and Social Change in India*, St. Martin's Press, New York.

[5] Kumar, Avinash, (18th February, 2009), Hindustan Times.

[6] Mazumdar.V. and Sharma.K, 1979, *Women Studies: New Perceptions and the Challenges*, Economic and Political Weekly, 14(3), pp.113-120.

[7] N.Desai., (1977). *Women in Modern India*, Second Edition. Bombay, Vora and Company.

[8] N. Gandhi., and N. Shah., (1991), *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary W omen's Movement in India,* Kali for Women, New Delhi.

[9] *Education, Development and Women's Liberation: Contemporary Debates in India:* Ghosh, R and Zachariah M (eds.). *Education and the Process of Change,* Sage, New Delhi.

[10] Pandhe.S. 1988, *Women's Studies and Women's Movement* Economic and Political Weekly, 23(40), pp. 2049-2050.

[11] Patel.Ila. 1998, *The Contemporary Women's Movement and Women's Education in India,* International Review of Education, Vol. 44, No. 2/3, pp. 155-175.

[12] Patel.S. 1988, *Construction and Reconstruction of Women in Gandhi*, Economic and Political Weekly, 23(8), pp. 377-387.

[13] Poonacha.V. 1994, Gendered Stp: Review of Two Decades of Women's Movement and Women's Studies, Economic and Political Weekly, 29(13), pp. 725-728.

[14] Sharma.K. 1992, Contemporary Women's Movement in India: Its Dialectics and Dilemmas, Indian Journal of Social Sciences, 5(1), pp. 1-31.

[15] Usha Devi. M. D. 1992, *Research Perspective for Understanding Women's Education,* Economic and Political Weekly, 27 (24-25), pp. 1279-1282.