



Challenges in Quality Higher Education with Special Reference to Women Education

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ABSTRACT

In the 1970s, struggles by women around issues of domestic violence, women's employment and livelihoods, communalism, representations in the media, etc., provided the impulse to women's studies, which has been referred to as the 'academic arm' of the women's movement. Critical inquiry into the structural and cultural bases which characterise the maintenance and reproduction of patriarchy in India at the familial, community and state levels have been carried out by women's studies scholars. Women's studies gained well-earned legitimacy within academia firstly through state support for its institutionalization in the 1980s, and more significantly, through the substantial contributions of feminist scholarship to the so-called mainstream disciplines. By questioning the value-neutrality of disciplinary perspectives, pointing to exclusions and invisibility, recovering women's voices and concerns from the margins, and often from outside the pages, of mainstream academic discourse, and constantly unveiling and exploring the complex relationship between power and knowledge, women's studies have engaged directly with the politics of knowledge.

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In the 1970s, struggles by women around issues of domestic violence, women's employment and livelihoods, communalism, representations in the media, etc, provided the impulse to women's studies, which has been referred to as the 'academic arm' of the women's movement. Critical inquiry into the structural and cultural bases which characterise the maintenance and reproduction of patriarchy in India at the familial, community and state levels have been carried out by women's studies scholars. Women's studies gained well-earned legitimacy within academia firstly through state support for its institutionalization in the 1980s, and more significantly, through the substantial contributions of feminist scholarship to the so-called mainstream disciplines. By questioning the value-neutrality of disciplinary perspectives, pointing to exclusions and invisibility, recovering women's voices and concerns from the margins, and often from outside the pages,

of mainstream academic discourse, and constantly unveiling and exploring the complex relationship between power and knowledge, women's studies have engaged directly with the politics of knowledge.

It is somewhat surprising, then, and worthy of critical attention, why feminist engagements with the politics of knowledge, both in the academic arena and through activism, have bypassed the field of education in a larger sense and school education in particular. The effects of formal education on Indian women over the so-called silent years between independence and the early 1970s was captured in the Towards Equality report which indicated its role in sharpening class inequalities between women. The findings of the Committee on the Status of Women in India should have alerted the women's movement to the need to interrogate the social character of formal education in India, which has acted to divide women by class, caste and ethnicity.

Women and Education

Larger feminist critiques of development policies and paradigms have unfortunately overlooked the ways in which formal education, in its organisation and processes, offers a narrow range of subject positions for girls and women, locating and even objectifying them as mere instruments in the narrative of national progress. The absence of critical thinking on formal education indicates the low status educational studies hold in the hierarchy of knowledge, even feminist knowledge, in India. Feminist scholars of education in the west have contributed to understanding the relationship between schooling and the reproduction of gender relations in capitalist society. They have examined how race, class and gender intersect in the making of policy, school knowledge, the formation of gendered and raced identities, and modes of resistance from a feminist perspective. This literature is largely what many of those interested in educational issues in India have to refer and draw from, given the paucity of theoretical work in our own contexts. In India, we still do not seem to share a discourse within which to discuss how educational visions have been highly gendered, both within nationalism as well as in the post-independence era; or to examine girls' education in relation to issues of their labour and sexuality. There is, however, a large body of literature from which to construct frameworks to understand these issues in our own context. Feminist perspectives within the different disciplines, as well as the availability of a wide range of sources (women's writings, histories of women's organisations, women's journals, policy documents, NGO reports, etc) provide a base for theoretical understanding of gender and education. However, this important work of analysis remains to be done. Meanwhile, those of us who work on education within women's studies and the women's movement will have to continue to nudge and push: for inclusion of gender perspectives in educational fora, and the inclusion of educational concerns within the women's movement.

The above discussion is not intended to underplay the significant interventions made by the women's studies movement. In 1986, largely due to the persistence of women's studies scholars, the National Policy

on Education (NPE) specifically emphasized the necessity of reorienting education to promote women's equality, and envisioned education playing a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women. The policy recommended revision of textbooks to eliminate gender bias and stereotyping and the training of teachers towards greater gender sensitivity. The NPE 1986 was a radical policy intervention in that it placed gender equality through education as a social and political commitment of the state; and it has continued to guide advocacy efforts for women's education. However, even this major intervention at the policy level was limited by the fact that education, and school education in particular, had remained marginal to knowledge building within the women's movement and women's studies.

Thus the NPE Review Committee (NPERC) in its critique of the 1986 policy, noted that gender was markedly absent in the chapter on 'Content and Process of School Education' except for a mention that 'equality of the sexes' is to be one of the 10 core areas. It also pointed out that the task of addressing gender is fraught with complexity: A gender perspective in the content of education means more than the elimination of sexist bias and stereotypes from textbooks. The task of bringing a gender perspective into the curriculum is a complex one and requires research inputs, discussion and debate. Gendered access to educational facilities, sexism in school textbooks and stereotyping of curricular choices are issues that have been extensively examined by women's studies scholars. These are extremely important issues in themselves, but are not independent of other processes of schooling. Forms and representation of knowledge in school curricula reflect the discourses of formal education and the pattern of social relations in society – framing, normalising and legitimizing social inequalities, processes in which the state plays a critical regulatory role.

Women Education and its Analysis

We need to critically analyse why education has been peripheral to the concerns of the contemporary women's movement in India, given the legacy of struggle by women to establish their right to education. It is worth

considering whether the assumed instrumentalist nature of formal education, particularly in the post-independence era, has not inhibited more radical interpretations of what formal education means for girls, both in terms of self-perceptions as well as materially. The very premise of girls' education, especially education of poor girls – and here it is difficult to disentangle policy rhetoric from popular perceptions – is based on an understanding that education is critical to social development – lower fertility, better child-rearing practices and so on. On one hand, these normative positions on the 'benefits' of women's education are persuasive and compelling; on the other, the struggle for the right of girls and women to education gets reduced to issues of access alone. The absence and avoidance of issues of conflict and contestation in mainstream education and curriculum discourse adds to this unidimensional understanding. It has been easier for women's groups and NGOs to work with girls outside the system of formal education, especially the government system of education, which is notoriously inflexible. It is instructive, at the risk of repeating familiar statistics, to draw a picture of what it means to be schooled in India. There are data to show that the large majority of children, especially poor children, are in government schools.

Conditions in most of these schools are hardly conducive to meaningful learning. A minuscule percentage of government schools possesses the very basic set of facilities such as adequate classrooms, toilets and drinking water, teaching-learning materials and libraries. There is evidence to show that physical inaccessibility, irrelevance of curricula, repeated 'failure' and even harsh treatment in schools contribute to children dropping out or never enrolling in school; it has been seen that in the case of girls, the influence of these factors is even more acute. According to an NSSO survey, about 26% of those who had dropped out cited reasons other than poverty – unfriendly school environment, doubts about usefulness of schooling and inability to cope with studies. Among girls in rural areas these factors accounted for over 75% of dropouts. Dropout percentages among girls are extremely high in schools: figures for 1997-98 indicate that 41% dropout at the primary level, 58% at the middle school level and 72%

% at the secondary level. Discontinuation rates of rural girls have been found to be twice as high as those of boys. Literacy and numeracy skills are abysmal among children who attend government schools, and are further devalued for poor girls who leave school, most often into environments that do not promote or sustain literacy.

New Challenges in Women Education

Part of the challenge in thinking through our concerns about gender and education lies in uncovering the dialectical linkages between the formal education system and larger social and economic processes, and their influence on girls' and women's lives. In the present context, we are now seeing how an education system already fragile and alienated from its objectives is increasingly facing the combined onslaught of rightwing reaction and the market. Both portend the deepening of social divisions and inequalities. A serious issue affecting girls' education is the appropriation of curriculum discourse by the Hindu Right.

The National Curriculum Framework 2000 has a clear-cut position on gender issues, which embodies a break from the rhetoric and approach of earlier policy documents. It seeks to posit women as recipients of a benevolent if not empowering culture, promotes the idea that gender equality is an organic part of our cultural legacy and that the education of girls has a place to play in social cohesion, rather than social transformation. The glorification of women as mothers and the pronouncement that gender equality will be promoted through 'non-adversarial' positions signifies the considerable shift from the NPE 1986, which spoke of education as an interventionist agency to promote gender equality in Indian society. The studies show that privatisation of school education, hitherto restricted to urban centres, has been on the increase in rural areas since the early 1990s. The withdrawal of the state from formal education has been legitimised and endorsed by neoliberal discourse, most prominently by the Ambani-Birla report (2000) which classifies education as a non-merit good. Several micro-level studies indicate that families are investing scarce resources in sending their sons to private rather than government schools. There

is a perception that English, widely taught in private schools across a wide spectrum from elite to sub-standard, holds the key to competing for scarce jobs in a shrinking labour market. It is necessary to study the implications of these trends on exacerbating gender divisions and the longterm effects on girls' participation in education. These trends are serious reminders to us that the women's movement must intensify its engagement with issues concerning women's education.

National Curriculum Framework

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) officially released in 2000, reflects the efforts of the Hindu Right to seize the opportunity of commandeering the ideological state apparatus of education to push through its regressive agenda at the national level. The NCF marks a significant departure from earlier frameworks (1975, following the 1968 Education Policy; and 1988, following the 1986 Education Policy), which stressed the inculcation of values of democracy and social justice, and national integration through appreciation and understanding of the commonalities of different subcultures. The debate on the NCF 2000, and the strong criticism against it (articulated in a petition to the Supreme Court and discussed to some extent in the media), highlight the deeply ideological character of education. Spectacular in its shoddiness and banality, the text of the NCF is an ominous narrative of the Right's educational agenda. It is significant that the framework nowhere addresses the huge deficits in education at all levels.

In the NCF, history holds a key position in the reformulation of social knowledge. Apprehensions expressed by historians, who have been protesting against the framework since 2000, have been vindicated, with textbooks now published (after the vacation of the stay by the Supreme Court) revealing gross distortions of history with a fetishist preoccupation with a glorious Hindu past. Religious education, thinly disguised as education for values, permeates all sections of the NCF. Value education is the main plank for launching the 'spiritual and moral renewal' of India through education: Schools can and must strive to restore and sustain the universal and eternal values oriented towards the

unity and integration of the people, their moral and spiritual growth enabling them to realise the treasure within. People must realise who they are and what is the ultimate purpose of human life. Self-recognition would come to them through proper value education that would facilitate their spiritual march from the level of sub-consciousness to that of super consciousness through the different intermediary stages. Value based education would help the nation fight against all kinds of fanaticism, ill will, violence, fatalism, dishonesty, avarice, corruption, exploitation and drug abuse [NCF 2000: 17].

According to the NCF, it is through learning of the 'lives of prophets, saints and the sacred texts' (p 35) that children can achieve higher SQs (Spiritual Quotients) and EQs (Emotional Quotients) (p 13). Value education is envisaged to form an integral part of the child's school experience. The child, in the vision of the NCF, is to be immersed in an environment where values, not derived from rules of citizenship in a democratic polity, but from religion, will predominate.

Value education and education about religions would not form a separate subject of study or examination at any stage. These would be so judiciously integrated with all the subjects of study in the scholastic areas and all the activities and programmes in the co-scholastic areas that the objectives thereof would be directly and indirectly achieved in the classrooms, at the school assembly places, play-grounds, cultural centres and such other places [NCERT 2000: 33]. Quite apart from the dreary drivel it contains, the framework is an enormous setback to the women's movement. It portends a future for women's education which is deeply disempowering. The lack of seriousness with which the NCF approaches social disadvantage can be seen in the manner in which a range of citizens is subsumed within a single disadvantaged category: women, dalits, adivasis, along with children with impairments.

Valorisation of religious tradition, the leitmotif of the document, negates the essentially oppressive role tradition plays in women's lives to curb and control their sexuality, labour and individuality. It is not surprising that the NCF, displaying its ideological position on

women, includes education of girls in a section titled 'Education for a Cohesive Society'. Here, we get a glimpse of how girls can be educated the 'Right' way. Patriarchal oppression and the struggle for equality and justice are non-issues in a social order in which caste and gender hierarchies are on-conflictual, harmonious elements in the seamless fabric of the great Indian tradition: Besides, making education accessible to more and more girls, especially rural girls, removing all gender discrimination and gender bias in school curriculum, textbooks and the process of transaction is absolutely necessary. Moreover, it will be the most appropriate thing to recognise and nurture the best features of each gender in the best Indian tradition. After all, India gave her women the right to vote without any prolonged battle for it unlike in the west. There is a need to develop and implement gender inclusive and gender sensitive curricular strategies to nurture a generation of girls and boys who are equally competent and are sensitive to one another, and grow up in a caring and sharing mode as equals, and not as adversaries [NCERT 2000: 9].

The 'vision' of the NCF neatly accommodates the pervasive instrumentalist view of education for girls and women, in which women are seen primarily as reproducers. Equality of the opportunity [sic] of access to education is necessary if more women are to become the agents of change. Therefore, education of women is an important key to improving health, nutrition and education in the family, and also empowering them to participate in decision-making. Investment, both in formal and non-formal education of young children in general, and of the girl child in particular is expected to yield exceptionally high social and developmental returns [NCERT: 19]. It may be tempting to dismiss the NCF as the usual hocus-pocus regularly churned out by the cultural nationalists who command so much media space these days. However, it is important to remember that the framework will influence the ways in which millions of children understand their social worlds and identities through textbooks. Ironically, moreover, the anti-modernity of the NCF's vision of education is entirely compatible with the processes of globalisation. 'Indianising' and 'spiritualising' the curriculum is not antithetical in the least to orienting education to the

market. Vocationalisation, a recommendation of the NCF, was originally envisaged as an alternative to college education, which students could opt for after Class XII. It has been a nonstarter in Indian education, with less than 5% of students opting for vocational courses [Visaria 1998]. Vocational courses for girls are highly gendered – typing, tailoring, etc., which only allow them entry, if at all, into low-paying jobs in the unorganized sector. The NCF now recommends vocational streaming after Class X. This will only serve to heighten inequalities by caste, class and gender, by further restricting the access of poor girls, dalits and other marginal groups to higher education, and decreasing their representation at this level.

In this planned NCF concept of education, emphasis on 'value education' derived from religion and 'tradition' replaces that on social justice, tolerance and plurality. The idea of 'unity in diversity', an educational slogan of the post-independence era, which had some pedagogic value despite its problems. This new thrust is of a piece with efforts in other spheres to manufacture a majoritarian view of society in which the cultural and political space for all marginalized sections, especially minorities, will progressively shrink. What better place to begin than in school? The complex ways in which these distortions will affect the identities of girls of different classes, castes, religions and ethnicities, providing an illusion of empowerment for some and drastically disempowering others, is a cause for concern for the Indian women's movement.

Education and Market

Since the introduction of market reforms in India, there has been a steady attempt to devalue the role of the government in the social sector. Undoubtedly, the Indian state must bear the responsibility for its lack of commitment to constitutional directives which mandate that all children must be healthy and educated in independent India. However, we need to consider whether privatisation in the education sector is an adequate answer to the government's lack of performance. There is increasing evidence that privatisation is likely to exacerbate existing gender inequalities in education. In April 2000, the prime minister's Council for Trade

and Industry submitted a report on a policy framework for reforms in education. The convenor and principal member of this 'special subject group' were two leading industrialists. The report outlines in a succinct manner the conditions of education in India, and talks of the different worlds coexisting side by side: the privileged few, the resistance to change from various quarters, the situation of poor children in indefensibly adverse learning conditions. It speaks of raising standards and working to 'create a competitive yet cooperative knowledge-based society'. This report explicitly argues the necessity of opening up the secondary sector to private initiatives, while maintaining that the primary sector needs the full support of the government in order to meet the requirements of Article 45 of the Constitution.

The report unequivocally calls for government support to private investment in secondary education in every taluka, and a 'user pays' principle, as well as direct foreign investment, at the higher education level. The report is profoundly lacking in any reflection on what constitutes learning, what and how children should be learning. It talks of creating 'smart schools', which must be competitive and innovative. Our endeavour, it suggests, should not be the creation of an environment that produces industrial workers and labourers but one that fosters 'cutting edge' knowledge resources which can place India in the 'vanguard in the information age' (p 3). Several contentious issues in the report need to be debated. Firstly, we must ask ourselves how it is that industry is dictating what national educational priorities must be. Obviously, there is a huge educational market at stake here. A close look at other social sector policies tells us the same story.

The National Population Policy 2000, for instance, talks of private investment in basic education for girls and the creation of markets at the village level which will motivate girls to take up vocational training. It is clear that the logic of market intervention in education is related to so-called 'efficiency' and the generation of profit, in the context of education supposedly emerging as a new sector of the global economy. What is frightening, however, is that any educational vision or perspective will be surrendered to this logic. Hence, in the Ambani- Birla report, 'knowledge' and information'

are viewed as the same, since this justifies entry into the global IT market. But should we not pause to reflect how this approach, in one imperious sweep, negates the years of struggle and debate on making education relevant and contextual for children as the best way to sustain their interest in school-based learning? Have we not learned from the available evidence that it is because of an information-loaded curriculum that children find school boring and in the face of other difficulties, leave early? But the market will demand information, not local knowledge which children are familiar with and can acquire genuine skills from. We need to contest the report's neoliberal approach to education on both political and pedagogical grounds.

Privatisation: Intensifying Gender Inequalities

Given that up to the 1990s privatisation did not find mention in policy documents, it is quite amazing how fast it has gained ground and seized the imagination of our educational decision makers. The government's withdrawal from the education sector and the entry of private enterprise is by design, not by default. The failure of the state to provide basic education to all children takes on a different dimension in the context of structural reform of economies. The experiences of other countries attempting such reforms in the name of efficiency tell us that they serve to further marginalise communities who already find themselves on the periphery of formal education. Although overall most children are in government schools, the share of enrolments in private schools out of total enrolment has been steadily increasing, as more and more parents feel that the poor quality of learning offered by state-run schools add to further disadvantage their children's life chances. There is no regulation or monitoring of most of these private schools, many of which remain unrecognised. Evidence points to the fact that the standards are poor, teachers are underpaid and facilities are lacking. Then why are they still in demand? Most of them have one selling point: the teaching of English. Hence the demand for private schools is largely related to popular perception that knowledge of English is necessary to survive in the new labour market. It is instructive to see what this means in terms of actual money spent. The average

annual expenditure by families per child in government schools is ₹ 317, in government-aided schools it is ₹ 391 and in private schools it is ₹ 742. Private expenditure has increased as a percentage of consumption expenditure from 2.5% in the early 1980s to 3.5% in the late 1990s (p 60) [NSSO 1995-96, cited in National Human Development Report 2001, pp 55-56]. Justified on the basis of returns through employment, increased household expenditure on education will inevitably be discriminatory: boys' education will be favoured over that of girls. There is growing evidence that beyond a certain income level, girls are being sent, if at all, to government schools, whereas their brothers are sent to private schools. For girls, marriage ability remains the more critical criterion. Thus, while there is some evidence of increasing demand for girls' education, even in rural areas, the motivation of parents is to seek upwardly mobile marriage to educated salary earners.

Privatisation is unlikely to embody the social understanding and vision which can address the real issues behind lower participation of girls in education. Recent developments indicate that policies are becoming increasingly gender-blind. One may even venture to say that they are erasing whatever gains have been made towards girls' well-being. We are already witness to drastic reductions in the outlays on the mid-day meal programme, which, with all its problems, has served to ensure some nutrition for poor children, especially girls, and has been shown to have a positive effect on retention in schools. The 93rd Amendment Bill, declaring education as a fundamental right, does not include the under-6 population from its purview. This effectively means that the entire ICDS programme of early childhood education has been put into jeopardy. It also means that older girls will have to participate for even longer hours in sibling care. The emphasis on income generating activities as a priority for educated women bespeaks this myopia. Education for five years, basic literacy and numeracy skills which can just about sustain these activities, are deemed sufficient for girls.

Although economic independence is an important aspect of women's empowerment, it cannot be reduced to income generating activities, which more often than not mean low-paying, insecure jobs, often within the

parameters of the traditional domestic roles of women. It is a telling commentary on our caste, gender and occupational hierarchies that the Kothari Commission's recommendation of neighbourhood schools could never be put into practice. Neighbourhood schools would perhaps have altered the very texture of our society, and generated questions missing from the educational agenda today, such as the social contexts of learning and content of curriculum. Despite the claims of privatization to being a great social leveller based on merit alone, for girls, and particularly poor girls, it is likely to be yet another mode of discrimination within the family and economy. As Mary Warnock puts it: 'There is a world of difference between the equal right to education and the right to equal education'. Class, caste and gender inequalities in education are only going to increase without strong state commitment to equality.

That the Indian state has failed to stem these inequalities is not in doubt. However, we should recognise that entrenched privileges of the elites functioning within Indian patriarchal society have contributed to this failure. These interests will continue to influence privatisation as well. We may recall that 25 years ago, J P Naik said that equal opportunity in education cannot be seen in isolation from enhancing opportunity on the political and economic fronts to 'destroy privilege itself'.

What Is To Be Done?

Where democratic spaces are increasingly shrinking under the weight of a majoritarian state and the forces of the market, how can the women's movement re-engage with questions of education? In this paper, I have tried to raise a few issues which could be addressed as a tentative beginning to this re-engagement. To my mind, there is need for intensive monitoring of new developments which are likely to impact girls' education. Women are central to the contemporary politics of culture embodied in the NCF. The struggle for an egalitarian and democratic culture should be extended to a struggle for an education that is critical of received ideologies and can promote such a culture. For this we may have to work to mainstream gender concerns into alternative educational discourse. Unfortunately, as I have attempted to point out here, there is a gap

between those who are part of the more radical debates on education, most of whom are sensitive but hesitant to address gender issues, and women's studies scholars and activists who do not direct their analysis of gender and society towards questions of educational theory, pedagogy and curriculum.

Many women's activists and organisations participate in sessions with teachers where gender issues are discussed. Teacher training is an important area of intervention, but we should be a little wary of training in isolation from the experience of teachers in schools. At a recent seminar on school education, a participant lamented that a standard response of school administrators to problems of girls' education is to suggest a training course. She said that the idea of training as a solution has become so commonplace that school teachers and even NGOs have unquestioningly accepted it. This brings to mind an interesting experience we had two years ago while studying social contexts of schooling in Panchmahals district in Gujarat [Manjrekar and Surti 2000]. A single teacher managing five classes in a single room (a new room constructed under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) lay unused because it was close to collapse) told us that she had learned a great deal from the gender training course she had received under the DPEP. How do you use some of the ideas in your classroom, we asked. She told us that she made the girls and boys sit together, because in the course she had learned that gender segregation was not a good practice. She added that the arrangement prevented social interaction in the classroom making it easier for her to teach in that difficult situation. Now, in many coeducational schools, seating girls and boys next to each other rather than in the more usual segregated manner is employed as a 'shaming' technique, used by teachers to prevent 'indiscipline' in the classroom. The above example highlights the absurdity of reducing concerns about gender in school education to 'gender training', from which teachers take away what is most practical to their pressing needs in undoubtedly adverse situations.

Privatisation is another area we must keep monitoring. The devaluation of government schooling over the past twenty years or so has been speeded up by market reforms

since the early 1990s. Data from urban areas shows that corporation and government schools now mainly have poor girls and very poor children from other marginal communities; in many cities, municipal schools with good infrastructure are lying vacant. It is important to engage with government bodies to see what can be done to improve the quality of schooling so that more girls can attend these schools and attain an acceptable level of education. Finally, in the face of multiple pressures, can we debate our – feminist – understanding of what it means to be educated as a girl/woman in contemporary India? Can we put forward an alternate perception of girls' education? Young girls today are facing newer, more complex, forms of regulation.

For instance, our experience in an urban context suggests that young school going girls, under the influence of the market and the media, are experiencing new consumption-related desires, such as the desire to look good. We have also found that poorer girls engage in piece-rate work after school hours to earn enough to fulfil these new needs. To fight for our rights, and teach girls well so they can fight too, they said. Can education engender such resistance? Is this the alternate, critical consciousness we have been hoping to articulate as an aim for girls' education? And does it necessarily have to come at so heavy a price?

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