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Women Education System in India

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the issue of Women Education System in India. Drawing on existing literature and various statistics concerning women's education, the paper provides an overview of the state of education with respect to women and highlights some of the issues and barriers to women's education. Based on an analysis of emergent issues, some recommendations and suggestions are offered in terms of grassroots level interventions, strategic initiatives and enabling policy framework, towards improving women's access to education. 'You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women' - Jawaharlal Nehru.

KEY WORDS: Women, Education, Policy

INTRODUCTION

Women have had a unique position of disadvantage in the history of nearly all civilizations. Not only have they often faced the "way-of-doing-things" from a particular caste or religious community, but those ways have also intersected with the patriarchal norms of the times. Throughout history, women folk have had to go through certain social deficits and bear the weight of various expectations which were quite different from the menfolk. These norms more often than not led them to be at a position of disadvantage and led to a struggle.

One such position was regarding their education in Indian society. Religion has always been one of the major forces in bringing about any changes

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in way of life and the way a society functions. Historically, religious beliefs had a strong influence on the education of women. This can be seen from the huge disparity which was present amongst the literacy rate of women from different religious communities in the early 19th century. According to a 1901-02 report by the Government of India's Education department, the percentage of school-going girls to the school-going age girls in different religious groups varied significantly. The percentage was 0.97% for the Hindu population and 1.23% for the Muslim population. On the other hand, the same percentage was as high as 50% for Christians and nearly 100% for Parsi communities. To supplement the idea that religious views were one of the reasons for the low participation of Hindu women in education, we can look at the report mentioned in the writing of Aparna Bau (Basu 2005).

It was made by William Adam in 1836 about the State of Education in Bengal and read that "*a superstitious feeling... exists in the majority of Hindu families ... that a girl taught to read and write will ... become a widow*". Such commentary on the mindset of the population indicates how the superstitions of the community kept education out of reach of women.

However, even though the general consensus in the Hindu society was such that the women should not read and write, some were more liberal in their views. The high-class women, from "respectable" households, often studied at home. Various other high-class Hindu families taught their women to read and write in the privacy of their homes. For instance, Jotirao Phule taught his wife, Savitri Bai Phoolley to read and write, who eventually opened the first girl's school in British India (Basu, 2005). But not all women were okay with

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studying in the confines of their homes. Some of them led the charge and worked to move the education of women from private to the public sphere.

Chandramukhi Bose and Kadambini Bose cleared the entrance exams for Calcutta university and went to college in 1883. They had special women's classes started in Bethune college as there were no girls' colleges and men's colleges did not admit girls. They both passed their B.A. exams and became the first graduates of the British Empire. Kadambini Basu, with the help of then Lt. Governor, went on to study at Calcutta Medical College. This opened up doors for her fellow women to pursue higher studies in the field of medicine (Basu, 2005).

The endeavors of such women were not isolated struggles. There were strong forces with the considerable influence that backed them. There were various communities that strongly advocated women's education. Most of these included the Christian missionaries and the Indian intelligentsia, who were deeply influenced by the ideas of liberty and equality. The community of Indian intelligentsia, who were strong advocates of female education provided support in multiple ways. Firstly, they educated their own womenfolk, who further became the leaders for the women's education movement. For instance, Savitri Bai Phooley, after being educated by her husband, went on to run various girls' schools in present-day Maharashtra. Secondly, the intelligentsia provided huge amounts of private funding for setting up girls' institutions. For instance, in and around 1850, Harkunvarbai, the widow of Hari Singh Keshar Singh, opened a girls' school in Ahmedabad and Sheth Maganbhai Karamchand, another wealthy patron of girls' education donated Rs.20,000 for a girls' school. Also, when the Bethune school opened up, Dakshinarajan Mukherjee not only

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donated Rs.5000 worth of books but also gave his land in Mirzapur for building the school. Thirdly, some urban intelligentsia had powerful ties with the high ranking British officials. It allowed intelligentsia to influence them to work towards the promotion of education for women. One such example is of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar who founded 35 schools in the Southern district of Bengal and got them to be recognized and government-aided with help of the Lt. Governor of Bengal (Basu, 2005).

Various proponents within the British administration as well, despite the political and power dynamics of the Indian society, began to take force in the ecosystem of India. The colonial idea of changing women's position in Indian society was taking a stronghold. The British government was convinced by various political and social agents to fight against the patriarchy rampant in society. This led to a higher involvement of the government in matters of education and the British government openly advocated women's education. John Drinkwater Bethune opened the Hindu Female School in 1849 in the region of Calcutta. After Bethune passed away, Lord Dalhousie supported the school with full vigor. This trend continued with the coming of Education Dispatch by Sir Charles Wood in 1854 and Hunter Commission 30 years later (*ibid*).

Apart from the fear of conversion under the influence of convent schools, the aim of women's education was a factor for lower enrolment of girls in school. The aims were a topic of debates that discussed if the aim of education should be intellectual development or improvement of skills as a homemaker. There were proponents on both sides, with the Indian side fiercely advocating

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for women to be better role models consistent with Hindu thought, such as wives and mothers, through education.

Mahratta editorial published a note of caution when DK Karve appealed for the support of women's education by saying that the society would accept universities if they align with Hindu thought and practices.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak's note on female schools in Poona (now Pune) questioned the aims of the schools in 1887 saying if the aim is to change the Hindu households, then the education will be strongly opposed and condemned. The Calcutta University Commission went on to make a distinction between two types of women – those who will work towards managing the household and those who will help further the knowledge of society – and outlined different course of studies for each of them, suggesting depriving a majority of women of the opportunity for intellectual development (Bhattacharya et al, 2003).

However, various players rejected this idea and strongly advocated the availability of education, as rigorous as those available to men, for the women. They were insistent to keep the education out of the hands of local authorities, for then the education would be influenced heavily by patriarchal norms of the community. Miss McDougal, principal of Women's Christian College, was one such person. In her words "Indian men are not yet capable of realizing women's point of view" and she believed that if the power is decentralized then "intellectual training would nearly in every case be made subordinate to instruction in practical and ornamental accomplishment". Two years after this, in 1919, the Governor-General in Council to the Secretary of State, outlined in a policy resolution - "*in order to obviate the possibility that educational benefits may in some places be monopolized by those classes of the community which*

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have enjoyed the larger share of them in the past, it will be necessary to keep a watchful eye upon the interests of the depressed and less fortunate classes”
(Document No. 119, 1919 as cited in Bhattacharya et al, 2003).

Thus, we see that the state of women’s education in India was influenced and shaped by various forces, sometimes opposing and sometimes reinforcing. These forces arose from all different motivations such as political, religious, and social.

CONCLUSION

The way these forces and their agents, interact with each other led to the shaping of the educational landscape, and set the stage for further development post-independence. Some of these factors are still in play at large in the society that we see today. The patriarchal norms which stop women from accessing education are still strong in society as we see today. There are instances where the girl child would be sent to a government school, which is considered of lower quality, while the male child would be sent to a private school. There are instances where the girl child would be married as soon as she is of legal age without consideration of how it might affect her education. The burden of household chores is unequally divided between males and females, which makes it harder for female students to balance school work, as it is expected of females to be “homemakers”. And there is still a reluctance to invest in a girl child’s education. As a country, we have come a long way, but there is still an even longer way to go. Each step that we take towards equal access to quality education is a victory. Each legislation passed and each girl child educated, is a step in a positive direction. And every effort counts, as history has shown us.

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