

Women & Education: A Historical Analysis of Gender Gap in India

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ABSTRACT

Education by far is considered the best way to achieve gender equality. Scholars considered education to be a great social equalizer. However, it is not always the main factor behind any significant social change. At times, changes in political, economic or legal structure affects social structure, thought process and practices. This is evident once we peep into Indian history to trace the roots of exclusion of women from education that led to her subordination. The paper traces the roots of gender inequality with respect to education from origin of human civilization to the Vedic, post-Vedic to the age of Dharmashastras and age of Islam in India down to the Mughal and colonial rule in India. One commonality across the ages- women at large had been denied education since post-Vedic times, with the exception of few royal and elite women. The aim of education was mainly to train them to become good wives and mothers and attain good virtues required to run the household. Even the social reformers of the early nineteenth century who took up the cause of women's education did not aim to empower women but educate them to be good wives and mothers.

Key Words: Education, Socialisation, Patriarchy, Gender Gap, Gender Discrimination

Introduction

Education is the mirror of any contemporary society. It is a process through which the society formally or informally transmits accumulated experience, knowledge, skill, wisdom, values from one generation to the other. Knowledge skill, expertise, capability develops demand for a person and is a pre-requisite for ones, success. For women to be equal to men or compete with them, they need to be well equipped, trained and educated equivalent to men in the society (Wooley, 1904:4). Several scholars believe education to be an instrument of democracy a great "social equalizer,". In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist scholars listed a number of inequitable practices based on gender and sex that were prevalent in education sector. Issues like perceived inferiority of female, their historical exclusion from school, biased male-dominated curriculum and teaching, unrecognized achievements of women, practices followed by schools limited female students' development and opportunities. They opined that education is a key site for both reproducing and interrupting inequities (Lucy & Karen, 2016: 683).

A peep into Indian history indicates that men as women started as equals in with respect to education during the Vedic age but were gradually denied education in the post -Vedic age. This denial of education and gradual curtailment of her other rights led to her subordination which continued till modern times. Even today in Modern India, the government is struggling to achieve 100 percent female literacy. Since historical times, women at large have been deprived of education in India and even if they possessed some knowledge, it was either not acknowledged or not given legitimacy (Thakran, 1975:120).

The article is divided into two parts. The first part deals with feminist theories related to women's exclusion from education. The second part attempts to peep into Indian history for a clear understanding of the roots of gender gap in education in present day India. It tries to figure out whether women in India were educated during the Ancient and Medieval period. This is important for us to understand the history and level of female education in India at a time when modern education was introduced in India by social reformers and Christian missionaries. Since everything has a historical root, this paper attempts to explore the roots of gender based educational disparity in India by digging deep into our history.

Feminist Debates and Analysis on Gender based Exclusion from Education

The research on women began in the early 1970s with the declaration of International Decade of Women (1975-1985) by the United Nations. This led to large-scale research on the status of Indian women as well as research on women's education. Since mid-1980s, the focus of debate on women's education has shifted from gender gap and discrimination in education to using it as a tool to promote a new social order. However, research on women's education focused mainly on conventional surveys, but rarely reflected feminist perspectives. It did not focus on women's education nor had any impact in influencing mainstream educational research. Feminists have

done a lot of work on women's education over the years, it still remains on the fringe of women's studies and mainstream research work in this domain (Patel, 1998: 163).

The existing feminist theories offer empirical insights into the phenomenon of gender inequalities. The 'liberal' feminist theory dominated by sex socialisation paradigm believes social system is just by nature and the deviations from desirable conditions including educational inequality are due to wrong 'socialisation, information gap on issues confronting women and inadequate laws to deal with them. Formal educational institutions tend to perpetuate traditional socialisation and sexual discrimination practices through content (sex stereotypes in text books) and teaching practices (more expectation from boys than girls). Radical' feminist theory explain poor female literacy rate in many countries in terms of government apathy towards women, policy gap, inadequate resource allocation for female education. Socialist' feminist theory sees the school as a site for reproduction of women's oppression as workers and as women. They believe formal schools played a negative role in promoting women's education. (Devi, 1999:1279).

Emma Willard (founder of Troy Seminary in 1821) opined women's school should be different from that of men due to their different character and duties as compared to other. Willard opined that empowerment wasn't the aim of female education. It was aimed at developing females into trained mothers and teachers with high moral standards. As per Catherine Beecher, self-sacrifice was another trait to be inculcated in women. Such devout Christian women like Willard and Beecher opined teaching was more of a female activity accompanied by features of sacrifice and service and women were better equipped for sacrifice and service than men (Howe, 1977: 15). Education of women is closely connected with their social position. Any enhancement in education is generally linked to the improvement in women's social status. Thus, education is considered the most significant instrument for women's empowerment in society. However, it is not always the main factor behind any significant social change. At times, changes in political, economic or legal structure affects social structure, thought process and practices. If we trace the emergence of modern education in India, it suggests that education played a key role in process of social change (Kamat, 1976:19). It was the western educated intelligentsia class who took the initiative of social reforms in India and they worked for women's cause such as ban on sati, widow remarriage, opened schools for female education etc. Soon this encouraged women reformers like Pandita Ramabai, Sister Subbalakshmi, Savitribai Phule etc. to take up the cause of women's education. As early as 1900, Ramabai's Sharda Sadan had educated and trained 80 women who were able to earn their livelihood through teaching and nursing (Forbes, 1998: 47). There were many others like Mataji Maharani Tapaswini Devi, Dhondho Keshav Karve who opened girls' school in Bengal and Poona respectively in the early 1900. Still the ratio of schools for female or the number of females being educated was quite less as compared to male. Figures indicate that in 1854, there were 2875 boys schools in Bombay province with over one lakh male students, as compared to only 65 girls' schools (all private) with only 3500 female students. This gender gap in education has been a prominent feature of Indian education throughout British rule as well as post-independence period. The article attempts to analyse the antecedents of gender gap in education in India through an overview of the two preceding ages-the Ancient and Medieval age.

Ancient Age

Primitive society is seen as one in which men and women were born as equal. Substantial changes came with the advent of private property and allied institutions. Sex based social differentiation began with sedentary lifestyle, origin of agriculture and private property. The question arises that how did women in India transit from equality to the age of patriarchy. Renowned Historian Gerda Lerner in her work 'The Creation of Patriarchy' published in 1986 traces the roots of inequality between the sex way back to early neolithic hunter-gathering societies, where the precariousness of life necessitated an initial sex-based division of labour, where women combined childbearing with economic activities like food gathering, while male were engaged in big game hunting. Lerner was keen to look for explanations for change in relations between the two sex -male and female as a result of the developments associated with agriculture, sedentary lifestyle and emergence of unequal family structures. In early agricultural society, until the advent of plough, women participated effectively in field work and there was no visible gender gap in their social status (Lerner, 1986).

In the Vedic period, with the coming of Aryans, patriarchal family and male dominance had already surfaced. However, we do not find any visible gender inequality with respect to female education during this age. Co-education of boys and girls was the norm. Females also had to go through the upanayana samskara and the stage of brahmacharya to receive education. Prayers were offered for both son and beautiful intelligent daughter (Thakran, 1975:117). Textual sources indicate the presence of highly educated women like Lopamudra, Gargi, Ghosha, Vishvara, Nivavari women during this age. 27 out of over 1000 hymns of Rig Veda is said to have been composed by women sages, including Visvara (King, 1987). (Lerner, 1986). There is evidence of women of high intellect like Gārgi and Maitreyi who had attained the highest philosophical knowledge or Brahavidya (Mookherjee, 1994).

However, from the post-Vedic Age, the scenario changed to the detriment of women as they lost their right to education and prohibited to undergo upanayanasamskara. Although many women continued to receive education through the Buddhist monastic order until the marriageable age was reduced to eight or nine in the Epic period. This is well reflected from the words of Manu

"In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent". According to the code of Manu, a woman's business is to tend her husband and to worship him as God (Thakran, 1975:115).

Thus the age of restriction and subordination of women which began in the later Vedic age and perpetuated by Manu's law codes continued till the later ages. Hence women had been excluded from mainstream life since post-Vedic period, their rights curtailed, both education and property denied and later on forced to perform Sati. The law code of Manu and books like Dharmashastras had sounded death knell women's right to have their own identity and choice. However, most of these laws are supposed to have been formulated by Brahmin males. Hence feminist scholars like Uma Chakravorty have termed it the age of Brahmanical Patriarchy.

Medieval Age

The advent of Islam in 11th century did not bring about any drastic change with respect to rights and education of women. The general picture of Islamic society in India, was that women had no place in religious organizations and legal affairs, nor did they enjoy effective property or inheritance rights. Further, the introduction of purdah system or veil relegated her to the seclusion of harem with polygamy and 'triple talaq' (divorce) leading to worsening of women's condition. Scholars contend that religion in itself did not have a direct role in subordination of women as it itself was a product of the patriarchal society.

The founder of Islam, Prophet Mohammad wanted an improvement in women's status and grant her equality as far as possible in the prevalent conditions of the time. Prophet stressed on the acquisition of knowledge by every Muslim both male and female (Engineer, 1994: 298). However, under the influence of patriarchal values, Islamic shariah law assigned a much subordinate status to women than what Prophet had intended (Engineer 1994, 297). Thus, the Medieval age wasn't conducive for educational and intellectual growth of Muslim women at large. Mass education of women was unknown. Whatever, little education was imparted to a certain category of women, mainly connected to nobility or royal class, the aim was moral and mental development of female as good mothers and wives and train them in religious aspect. Moroccan traveler Ibn Batuta mentions about Sultan of Hinwar's keen interest in female education. He noticed 13 girls' school in his capital. Sultan Ghiasuddin of Malwa (1463-1500 A.D.) is said to have engaged tutors to train 15,000 ladies in different arts- music, wrestling, dancing, sewing, weaving, craft, teaching and trade. Education and training was mainly confined to royal women, female of lower strata largely remained illiterate (Sharma, 2016:207).

In the Sultanate period, some royal ladies acquired proficiency in military education. Razia Sultan is an example of highly educated royal women and a great patron of men of letters. She was also a poetess who composed verses in the pen name of 'Shirin'. Another lady Bibi Rauza of Jaunpur was such an accomplished educationist that Jaunpur became a centre of education during her lifetime (Sharma, 2016: 207-08). Under Mughals, many princesses excelled in the field of education. The first known royal lady with literary pursuits was Gulbadan Begum, the author of Humayun Nama. She was well versed in Persian and Turki language. Many Mughal rulers like Akbar and Aurungzeb are said to have opened school for education of princesses. Several Mughal princesses remained spinsters and spent their time in learning, education and economic activities. Akbar's mother Hamida Banu had good knowledge of medicine and treatment. Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri mentions Nur Jahan having the knowledge of medicine. She was well versed in Persian and Arabic and did a lot for cause of education. Royal ladies like Jahanara Begum, Zeb-un-Nisa Begum were extremely talented literary personalities as well as educationists during the Mughal rule (Sharma, 2016:209-11). Apart from the royal ladies, many other ladies got a chance to distinguish themselves. Persian lady Sati-un-Nisa, who served Mumtaz Mahal was a versatile genius and an expert in Persian language, medicine and served as the Sadr-un-nisa. We hear of a host of such learned ladies like Hafiza Mariyam, wife of one of Aurungzeb's nobles, Koki Jiu who played important role in Mughal politics, Jahn Begum, daughter of Abdur Rahim Khan-Khana was a great educationist. Many women of this age were great poetess but wrote in disguise with the name of Nihani or Makhfi (Sharma, 2016: 212-214).

Not only were they learned ladies, poetesses, educationist but also experts in various other skills like cooking, sewing, embroidery, decoration as part of their household routine. Nur Jahan excelled in several fields. Besides being an accomplished musician and lyricist, she designed and inspired the construction of many resorts and gardens. She was also skilled in needle work and had introduced many new designs and décor. Painting was a popular past time

of the ladies of royal harem (Sharma, 2016: 214-15). Hence it may be mentioned that many royal women who received education excelled in various fields. There was no dearth of talent among women in Medieval age but a large section of the female populace could not even identify their talent or hone it up on want of education.

Thus, we see ancient and medieval societies have tried to keep women at large uneducated or restrict her with elementary religious education towards making them good wives and mother. This trend continued till the colonial times when modern education for women was introduced by Western Missionaries in order to have a class of educated females to be good wives for their Indian civil servants working for British bureaucratic machinery. In nutshell the denial of education to women stemmed from the social patriarchal attitudes combined with religious and ideological mindset of the time. Unless there is change in societal values, women would continue to be subordinate under the alliance of patriarchy and religion. Any research effort directed towards understanding various dimensions of women's education should essentially focus on these issues and offer valuable solutions to the problems. Over centuries, social attitude in India has gradually changed and so has India's female literacy rate. Still, the goal of gender equality in education is still far off. Feudal traditions still persist in many pockets of Indian society. We have seen women's exclusion from education have deep roots in Indian society and a large section of the female populace in India still remain illiterate. Concerted efforts are required both at the level of society and policies to narrow down the gender gap and achieve full literacy.

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