

Education and Upliftment of Women

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*'The greatest revolution in a country is the one that affects
the status and living conditions of its women'*

~Nehru~

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The upliftment of women also gained importance with the attainment of independence in India in 1947. The independence of India opened up an unlimited horizon for the welfare activities for the women. The demand for the equal status in the constraints of the traditional system was long pending. So equality between women and men was the cornerstone of welfare policies towards women since independence. Mahatma Gandhi through his writings, and even more with his success in mobilizing women for various national movements, transformed the views of the national leadership about women's potential contribution to the nation. He, thereby, showed to the masses about his commitment towards equality.

The status of women and their social relationship was also due for a change as necessitated by the new social, political and economic organizations in society on the broader perspective. Perhaps it was only through the routine factors of processes of social change, namely, education, economic, historical, sociological, political and lastly influence of modernisation, all this had an interdisciplinary impact on the Society in general and women in particular.ⁱ

The beginning twentieth century specially witnessed significant changes in the position of women. Social change brought out through the Western education and the movements of progress and modernisation began to cast their direct impact on Indian societyⁱⁱ showing its repercussions on the status of the women,

Undoubtedly the women's movement in Indian remained confined to the upper classes, but Gandhi encouraged women from the downtrodden sections of our society to participate in the freedom struggle which served as a training ground for leadership to large number of women. These women further formed associations to fight for the fundamental rights of woman in India.

The process for the welfare of women was started during the British period. Due to the efforts of Indian social reformer like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar and many more reformers the Government passed many legislation for the prevent of the social evils of the society. The evils like practice of Sati (widow-burning on husband's pyre), Child Marriage, Polygamy, Female Infanticide were prohibited and

permission was granted for Widow Remarriage and many more welfare schemes initiated. Education for girls was promoted by opening many Schools and Colleges. Women were also allowed to vote by the Government of India Act, 1919. British rule thereby tried to put the females on equal footing with male counterpart in the society.

Early 20th century, witnessed the entry of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian politics. He was a very staunch supporter of the removal all the disabilities present in the society against the women. Gandhiji emphatically persuaded the women, who literary formed half of the population of India, to come out in large number in support of the cause of freedom. Women responded to his call and participated in large number under his leadership. Gradually they raise their voice against the age old suffering at the hand of the orthodox society.

The pre-independence days thus prepared the ground for women's increasing participation in public life. Women were made President of the Indian National Congress. Organisation like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) was conceived for the emancipation of women and to bringing justice to them. It created awakening among the women first in the upper segment of the society which later percolated down to other segments also. The demand for equal right, adult suffrage, equal opportunity in services, rights to contest election was put in the first round table conference. Few of their demand were fulfilled which facilitated them to participate in the general election of 1937. Women also actively participated in various movements during the struggle for freedom in large numbers. Women like Kamla Devi Chattopadhyay, Aruna Asaf Ali, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur to name a few, although the list is very long, actively participated in the national movement.

After getting independence the Congress Party which committed itself to grant universal adult suffrage way back in 1931 made it clear by the constitutional provision of full enfranchisement for the women under Article 326.ⁱⁱⁱ Thereby, placing women politically on equal footing with male counterpart. It also conferred on women equal social and educational rights and opportunities in respect to men under Article 15.^{iv} The Social Reforms Movement in various parts of country raised many issues such as abolition of Sati, Widow Remarriage, Women's Education etc. during the pre-independence era. Many women organisation emerged during the social reform and national movement. Some of them turned into welfare and charity organisations, while some others functioned within a liberal feminist framework.

The constitution of India is a 'social' document embodying the objectives of a social equality for all, be it the equality between men and women, between different caste, creed or region. This was for neutralising the cumulative socio-economic, educational and political disadvantages faced by them. A large number of legislations were enacted to ensure the fundamental rights and remove discrimination against the women. These legislations were related to the share in property; custody of children; marriage and other related issues. Amendments were carried out in the Indian Penal Code relating to the punishment of crimes against girls and women, particularly rape, trafficking, employment and working environment at their work place.

The Government realised that a way to reform the social taboos would be possible by enacting laws. So it undertook the task of modifying the laws relating to marriage, succession, adoption and maintenance. The Special Marriage Act, 1954 laid down the basic rules of marriage. It was made legal to marry any person irrespective of caste, creed, religion and community but with certain conditions like one should not have a living spouse, marriage to be solemnised in front of Marriage Officer after a notice of 30 days. Women were given right to divorce and right for maintenance from her husband.^v

The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 widened the scope to include almost every section of the society. The salient features of the Act were the abolition of caste restrictions in a marriage, enforcement of monogamy and permission to divorce or dissolution of marriage.^{vi} The Hindu Succession Act was passed in 1956. The Act conferred absolute right over the property acquired by the female Hindu by way of gift. Laws were enacted to prohibit immoral trafficking of women and girls by Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act, 1956. It emphasised the Article 23^{vii} of the Constitution of India, securing protection against exploitation and against moral and material abandonment of children.

Women apart from the task of homemakers were also working shoulder to shoulder with men in various factories. The Government passed number of laws to ensure reasonable working conditions for the female employees in various industries. It also adopted the principle of equal pay for equal work and standardisation of wages. The Government passed the Factories Act, 1948 to regularise the working environment especially for the women. Under the Act the timing for the working of the women was fixed between 6 A.M. to 7 P.M. The working hours were also fixed as nine hours a day. Further restrictions were also imposed on the type of work for which a woman could be employed like no women was allowed to clean, lubricate, or adjust any part of a machine while that machine is in motion.^{viii} The factories where more than fifty women were employed had to maintain a separate rest room with proper sanitary conditions.^{ix}

In 1952, the Mines Act was passed. It placed restriction on the employment of a woman below the ground level. The Act prohibits the employment of a woman employee in a mine for four weeks from the day she gives birth to child.^x The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 also emphasised the provisions of the abovementioned Acts. It, however, reduced the maximum working hour to 8 hours from the earlier 9 hours mentioned in the 1948 Act.

In any integrated programmes for women welfare, health measures are vitally important also enumerated by the Directive Principles of State Policy.^{xi} In India, the programmes for women and child health as well as family planning were given high priority. Special attention was given to rural women where the medical health care facilities were negligible. Before the start of the planning in India the health services were provided by different agencies in isolation. It was with the start of Five Year plans that the maternity and other health services and problems of women were taken up by the Ministry of Health as a consolidated programme.^{xii}

The plan gave priority to preventive health for the women. By the end of the First Five Year Plan, 674 primary health centres opened and 578 maternity sub-centres in 12,000 blocks. Several other Ministries like Railway, Defence, Labour etc also provided women health facilities. In 1953 a Central Social Welfare Board was established with a strategy to coordinate various women health programmes and to take the welfare activities to the rural areas.^{xiii} The board started 292 welfare extension projects specially health and education facilities for the rural women.^{xiv}

Women, although, working but were mostly working as labourers mainly because they were not educated. Women lagged far behind the men folk especially in education. Social reforms, therefore, also included education for women as a critical objective. Despite various efforts, improvement of general literacy for women was quite slow. Women education, although, picked up after independence and the rate of literate women increased but it was still far below the level of literacy for the men, resulting in the low status of women in the society.

The position of women vis-à-vis her position in society, her education level etc has seen many changes both in pre and post British rule in India. Their programmes mainly focussed on the abolition of Sati, widow remarriage, increase age of marriage and provide education. The reforms and the organisation of the movements like Brahmo Samaj, Deccan Education Society, Indian Social Conference, helped create public opinion against the evil customs of suppression of women and advocated for the education of the women

The Government of free India gave due importance to the promotion of women education. Education of girl or women was not considered good in the Indian society. Since it was thought that western education would undermine the feminine qualities of women and disgrace their families because modern education made them less amenable to parental control. Further it was also pointed out that women education in India was greatly handicapped for want of proper organisation, which was mainly due to the administrative machinery. During the British period also the Schools and Colleges were far less for the girls than the boys. Since in independent India education was primarily the state subject, Nehru therefore, urged the state governments not to reduce the expenditure on education no matter whatever is the nature of financial stringency.^{xv} Article 45 of the Constitution also made provision for free and compulsory education for all children within a period of 10 years.^{xvi}

Government reviewed the problems of the education system in India through various commissions and committees with special focus on finding problems related to women education. The recommendations of these commission/committees together with the constitutional provisions became the basis for priority determination in the planning for the Five Year Plans.^{xvii} The committee recommended that 'the education of women should be regarded as a major and special problem in education for years to come and that a bold and determined efforts be made to face its difficulties and magnitude and to close the existing gap between the education of men and women in as short a time as possible'.^{xviii} The level of difference was even more pronounced amongst the female of the lower classes.

The educational system on which the entire social and economic fabric rests has to be re-oriented in regard to the vital needs and requirement of a healthy and just social order. The system, which was inherited, only served the need of an alien Government. Government service was supposed to be the be-all and end-all of all education. Academic freedom was the very essence of dynamism that must characterise the educational programme. The Government, therefore, planned to make education purposeful that fits into the general scheme of development and facilitate the achievement of our national objectives. Thus reorientation in the system of education inherited from an alien administration became necessary in order to make purposeful education available to each and every citizen of the Country.

At the beginning of India's independence, the educational development in India was at a very low level and education of the girls was even more glaring. The modern educational system, which began in about 1800, did not made much progress even at the end of the British rule in India. The overall percentage of literacy in India was only about 14 while the literacy level of the State was 10.8 per 100 populations in 1951-52.^{xix} In the primary education (Class I-V or age group six to eleven), the total enrolment was 14.11 million, i.e., only one child out of every three was at school. In middle schools (Class VI-VIII or age group eleven to fourteen) the total enrolment was 2.04 million, i.e., only one child out of eleven was enrolled. The rate of stagnation and

wastage was very high. The curriculum, largely unrelated to the immediate environment, merely prepared the child for admission to the secondary school.

The enrolment at the secondary stage was only 3 per cent of the age group fourteen to seventeen. What was worse, the curriculum of the secondary education did not prepare the majority of students, through vocational courses, for a career in life. Instead, it merely fitted them for entrance into a college and unfitted them for almost everything else. The total enrolment at the university stage was also very low. There was very little progress in the field of professional education. On the other hand, there was a large output of sub-standard generalists.^{xx}

We also began with very high hopes. That primary education should be universal and compulsory was one of the earliest demands of the nationalist leadership. During the British rule in India little was done to give effect to provide basic education to all. The framer of the Constitution, therefore, emphasised in Article 45 to provide free and compulsory basic education by 1960, to all the children till they reach age of fourteen years without any discrimination between boys and girls.

In the post-independence period, several commissions and committees reviewed problems of educational reconstruction, expansion, qualitative improvements and financial implications. The important commissions and committees were the 'Scientific Management Committee' (1947), the 'University Education Commission' (1948-49) and the 'Secondary Education Commission' (1952-53). However none of the commissions gave any special privilege to the women education.

The main objective of the State Government was to make education purposeful. The correct planning of education forms the cornerstone of the entire fabric of planning. Boys and girls were to be trained so that each may enjoy a full life and also make a helpful contribution of social life. This was to be in consonance with the requirement of the country to advance in the area of science and technology. Special care was, therefore, given to the institutions catering to these needs.

Education was therefore regarded as the most significant instrument for changing women's status in the society. The disparity between male literacy and female literacy was almost 25% ^{xxi} in the first decade of independence, the gap almost continued till now. The literacy rate of females however improved from less than 1% in 1901^{xxii} (0.69 per cent) but it was still at a very low level.

Several schools and colleges were opened in villages and towns. In few States the education of girls upto graduation was made free and in some states partially free. A scheme of compulsory primary education was enforced for girls. But since due to limited resources it was not possible to open separate schools for the girls, the Ministry of Education therefore emphasised co-education schools. Between 1947-48 and 1957-58 about 79.8 per cent of the total number of girls were studying with boys at the primary level.^{xxiii} This trend of co-education was also seen at the higher levels of education.

The curriculum of women education was the same for the boys and the girls from primary stage to higher education. Some optional subjects, however, like home science, music, dancing, needle work etc., were introduced for girls. Some special institutions catering to the special needs of girls were also founded. Some of the important institutions were S.N.D.T. Women University, Bombay, Prayag Mahila Vidyapeeth, Allahabad and the Arya Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Baroda. Few other institutions prepared students for courses in home sciences like Lady Irwin School, Delhi was the first of this type. Besides this, Lady Hardinge Medical College and the College of Nursing in Delhi were opened to cater the need of the health services.

Despite all efforts of the Government there was still persistent problem of inequitable growth of education, especially for women, in different states. The difference was more glaring in the age group of 6-14 years. This means that since the beginning of education was neglected, then how they can get the higher education or professional education.

Statement showing the percentage of School going Children 6-14

| | As of 1.4.1956 | | | | 1960-61 | | | |
|-------------|----------------|-------|-----------------|-------|----------------|-------|-----------------|-------|
| | 6-11 Age Group | | 11-14 Age Group | | 6-11 Age Group | | 11-14 Age Group | |
| | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls |
| A.P. | 72.9 | 43.5 | 21.7 | 5.6 | 34.3 | 52.2 | 26.1 | 7.6 |
| Assam | 72.9 | 42.7 | 31.4 | 10.7 | 84.7 | 50.4 | 36.4 | 14.6 |
| Bihar | 61.3 | 14.3 | 21.9 | 2.0 | 76.0 | 24.1 | 29.3 | 3.7 |
| Gujarat | NA | NA | NA | NA | 90.1 | 52.9 | 36.6 | 15.2 |
| J&K | 35.5 | 8.9 | 18.3 | 4.0 | 71.0 | 20.7 | 37.9 | 9.5 |
| Kerala | 100.0 | 94.5 | 41.6 | 20.2 | 115.4 | 100.0 | 67.7 | 49.1 |
| M.P. | 72.7 | 17.7 | 22.9 | 3.9 | 75.0 | 22.4 | 25.6 | 5.4 |
| Madras | 83.8 | 48.9 | 30.8 | 12.3 | 105.8 | 65.9 | 44.4 | 19.1 |
| Maharashtra | 95.3 | 53.1 | 36.2 | 12.9 | 95.1 | 58.4 | 39.2 | 15.3 |
| Mysore | 84.1 | 46.2 | 31.2 | 10.7 | 91.9 | 55.3 | 32.3 | 12.5 |
| Orissa | 48.6 | 16.1 | 11.4 | 1.3 | 89.3 | 39.3 | 16.1 | 2.0 |
| Punjab | 81.4 | 36.5 | 42.3 | 10.4 | 65.0 | 34.7 | 44.3 | 12.6 |
| Rajasthan | 43.4 | 9.5 | 18.3 | 2.5 | 64.0 | 16.3 | 24.1 | 4.1 |
| U.P. | 54.7 | 14.4 | 23.0 | 3.3 | 68.8 | 19.5 | 27.1 | 5.1 |
| W. Bengal | 100.0 | 59.6 | 35.7 | 9.8 | 83.7 | 45.9 | 31.3 | 11.5 |
| All India | 73.8 | 34.7 | 28.7 | 8.5 | 82.5 | 41.1 | 33.2 | 11.3 |

Data collected from Report of National Committee on Women's Education pp. 41 and 57 and report of the Kothari Commission P. 126.

It is clearly visible that while in all the States the percentage of educated girls was lower than that of boys, the relative difference varied widely among different states. The gap between the education of boys and girls was wider in Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir than in other States. Kerala had the highest enrolment of girls. It can be observed that in States where the level of education was high the proportion of school-going girls also was high.

The Government since independence undertook several schemes, enacted many laws and provided lots of facilities to improve the condition of women. The social reforms and welfare schemes however was not able to influence each and every segment of the society. It was conspicuously visible in the difference between

the rural and urban section of the society as by 1961 the female literacy in the urban area was 34.51 percent in comparison to just 8.54 percent in rural area.^{xxiv} A significant section of Indian society also does not allow women to gain superior position in a traditional social set-up. It was believed that the gender projects suck up resources and the results are just a cosmetic changes in the material condition of women rather than any real change in their social position. Various women welfare programmes started which, perhaps, in long run would benefit each and every section of the society. The Government under Prime Minister Nehru, made its position very clear when he quoted Charles Fourier, the French Philosopher 'one could judge the degree of civilization of a country by the social and political position of women.'^{xxv} It was envisaged that the educated women would improve both their social and political position. Therefore special programmes were required especially in the field of education from the Government and also a change in attitude of the society towards women so as to mobilise all the hidden wealth (women labour and intelligence) in the interest of the nation.

The Government can make rules and regulation for the welfare of the society and women in particular. But if any major change has to be achieved it can only be achieved by the change in approach of the society towards the Women. Social approach and taboos of the society cannot be removed just by the rules and regulations, it has to be changed and imbibed within each and every individual of the society. The role of education especially female education in rural India in reducing absolute poverty will be the pivot for the women welfare in India. For holistic welfare of the women the thrust should be on education and economic independence coupled with ample administrative and political support of the Government.

ⁱ S.C. Dube - *Contemporary India and its Modernisation*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1974, p. 8

ⁱⁱ Santosh Goyal - "Effective Utilisation of Women Power Resources in India", AICC Economic Review, Vol. 20, 1968, pp. 15-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ K.V. Rao - *Parliamentary Democracy of India* (A Critical Commentary), The world Press Private Ltd., Calcutta, 1961, pp. 92-94.

^{iv} D.D. Basu – *Introduction to the Constitution of India*, New Delhi, 1964, p. 90

^v A Appadorai (ed.) – *Indian Studies in Social and Political Development*, 1947-67, 1967, p.5

^{vi} Ibid., p. 6

^{vii} D.D. Basu – *op.cit.*, p. 110

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- viii *Factories Act, 1948*, No. LXIII, Section 22, p. 20
- ix *Ibid.*, Section 27, p. 22
- x *The Mines Act, 1952*, No. XXXV, p. 411
- xi D.D. Basu – *op.cit.*, p.232-234
- xii *Plan and Prospects of Social Welfare in India, 1951-61, 1963*, pp. 15-16
- xiii Hiranmay Karlekar (ed.) – *Independent India*, Delhi, 1998, p. 260
- xiv *Plan and Prospects of Social Welfare in India, 1951-61, 1963*, p. 20
- xv quoted in S. Gopal – *Jawaharlal Nehru – A Biography*, Vol. 2, London, 1975, p.169
- xvi D.D. Basu – *op.cit.*, p. 144
- xvii J.C. Agarwal and S.P. Agarwal – *Educational Planning in India*, Vol I, New Delhi, 1992, p. 259
- xviii *Report of the National Committee on Women's Education*, New Delhi, 1959, p.38
- xix Baljit Singh ed. – *Education as Investment*, Meenakshi Prakashan, Meerut, 1967, p. 110, Table II A
- xx S.C.Dube – *India Since Independence*, Social Report on India 1947-72, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1977,p. 241.
- xxi Dr. Sarala Gopalan & Dr. Mira Shyiva – *National Profile on Women, Health and Development*, New Delhi, 2000, p. 105
- xxii *Ibid.*
- xxiii *Education in India*, yearly report 1947-48 and 1957-58, New Delhi, 1957, p. 48
- xxiv A.R. Kamat – *Women Education in Rural areas, SNTD Golden Jubilee Commemoration Volume P.89*
- xxv S. Gopal (ed.) – *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Vol. 3, old series, p. 361