

A Critical Appraisal of Women's Education: Transcending Prescriptive '*lady-like*' Ideologies (1948-1966)

Dr. Nirmala Shah¹

¹Assistant Professor, Department of History, Shyama Prasad Mukherji College for Women,
University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract

Improvements in educational opportunities are crucial to a nation's progress. Efforts were made in India shortly after Independence to eradicate illiteracy and provide education to all. There was also a focus on women's education. During the period under study, it was believed that the intent of female education was to make them good housewives and mother, i.e., to be '*lady-like*'. So, the curriculum was geared towards that. However, a shift was noticed over a period. For example, in 1962, a committee on differentiation of curricula for boys and girls was formed by government which stressed on common curricula for boys and girls. Thus, despite initial resistance, girls and women were eventually able to get access to education with governmental and individual efforts. The present paper attempts to examine the role education played in giving identity to women and how it brought about a social and silent revolution. Equally important is the emphasis on the significance of education in achieving women empowerment. The paper further traces the progress of education during the period under study and outline the challenges it faced.

Keywords: Women's education; social revolution; University Education Commission; National Council for Women's Education; Education Commission

Introduction

"By education I mean education and not merely learning to be lady-like. Learning to be lady-like may be good in itself, but it is not education as such. Education has mainly two aspects, the cultural aspect which makes a person grow, and the productive aspect which makes a person do things. Both are essential. Everybody should be a producer as well as a good citizen and not a sponge on another person even though the other person may be one's own husband or wife... So, it is highly necessary that we should develop our education, among our girls more especially, because men are provided for to some extent."

-Jawaharlal Nehru, 22 January 1955

In these words, Jawaharlal Nehru raised the issue of need for women's education. There is unanimity of opinion among all regarding the role of education and women's equality in society. Education is viewed as an important tool for giving a person its identity. For women, however, it was more about learning to act '*lady-like*', or like a decent wife and mother. Nevertheless, this view was gradually challenged, and the contemporary writings suggest that women were encouraged to take 'non-traditional' subjects. According to Vina Mazumdar's (1989, pp. 2-3) "integration in development theory", this is the belief that if women were provided with equal educational opportunities, society as a whole would benefit. Similarly, if women pursued

careers as teachers, administrators or planners, or enter the prestigious sectors of knowledge, management, technology or 'non-traditional' fields like environmental sciences, agriculture, forestry, etc. the issue of gender inequality would be solved.

The present paper attempt to comprehend the development of education and its role in women empowerment. Education gives identity and confidence to its beholder. Were girls and women getting access to education? Was education helping them form their identity? What measures did the government take after Independence to encourage women to pursue education? Why was girls' education focused? Women were expected to take care of the household. When they tried to move beyond their prescribed role, how the society responded? The growth of women's education brought about a silent revolution in the society. These are some of the questions and issues which this paper seeks to address.

Background

Education is regarded as an important vehicle for social transformation. It gives an identity to its beholder. Karuna Chanana (1990, p.75) has pointed out that 'education' is viewed as a 'reliable means to promote changes in attitudes' in the educational discourse. However, in India, the plight of women has always been miserable, and their education has been neglected. However, during the ancient period women enjoyed certain liberties and had right to education, which was mainly provided at home. Altekar (1959) pointed out that vedic sacrifices were performed jointly by husband and wife. Education was provided to girls, but it was predominantly limited to affluent families. Women in the ancient times such as Gargi and Maitreyi were known for their intellectual achievements. However, their condition deteriorated during the medieval period. Certain social evils became widespread in the society like female infanticide, polygamy, dowry, sati, only a son had the privilege of performing samskaras, etc.

This continued during the colonial period and women were considered subordinate to men and were dependent on men for everything. In the book 'History of British India', James Mill stated that the status of women could be an essential indicator of a society's advancement, and on this basis, India maintained a very low place (Basu, 2012-13, p. 245). Thus, women's education became a significant issue during the nineteenth century. The social reformers and British government became instrumental in setting up the centres of learning for girls and women. In 1882, the Indian Education Commission was formed which surveyed the issue of girls' education in detail and pointed out the backwardness of female education. It analysed the diverse aspects of girls' education and provided recommendations for fostering their education. In 1902, the Education Department adopted measures and formulated new strategies to promote education and establish separate schools for girls. Furthermore, inspectors were appointed, favorable grants were allocated to private girls' schools, and measures were implemented to entice women into the teaching profession. In her 1904 pamphlet "The Education of Girls," Annie Besant emphasized the scarcity of resources for women's education. A number of prejudices and superstitions were also attached to women's education which further hampered their education. For example, there was a prevailing belief that an educated girl would soon become a widow after marriage, that education would transform compliant girls into defiant individuals, thereby disrupting familial harmony, and similar notions. Thus, it was tough to convince people for girls' education. Consequently, the reformers and advocates of girls' education emphasized that education would enhance their roles as wives and mothers.

During the late 19th century, with the rise of nationalism, emphasis on women's education was further enhanced. However, one can note that the purpose of female education was to cultivate proficient housewives and mothers. For example, Dadabhai Naoroji pointed out,

“The time will come when natives generally will see the benefit of female education as a great social necessity to rise in civilisation and to advance social happiness and progress; and will understand that women had as much right to exercise and enjoy all the rights, privileges, and duties of this world as man, each working towards the common good in her or his respective sphere. But that time has not come yet... Good and educated mothers only will raise good and educated sons.” (Bhog, 2002, pp. 1638-39)

Various contemporary women’s writings emphasised on the role of women in home as mother and wife. They stressed that the curriculum should be geared to that. For instance, Dr. Shanti Malik, teaching in Government College, Hissar although was in favour of women’s education but also said,

“...the most important point is to exclude from the courses of study intended for girls, some of the prominent features of the present system of education such as cultivation of an overcritical attitude, imitation and business-mindedness which takes us away from the path of study... In the courses of study for woman, adequate importance must be given side by side with the intellectual development through the acquisition of knowledge-to the study of Indian culture, literature, religion, art and music, as well as hygiene, home science, child psychology-necessary for bringing up children and other useful topics connected with house keeping.” (Malik, 1969, pp. 109-10)

On the contrary, Raj Chaudhary (1969, p. 154), Principal of Guru Nanak Girls’ Degree College in Kanpur, highlighted the diverse initiatives in technical education and vocational training for women, which include programs in stenography, pharmacy, electronics, draughtsmanship, commercial art, interior decoration, and library science, etc. aimed at empowering women to achieve financial independence.

In an interesting study by Vina Mazumdar and Kumud Sharma (1979) a trend survey of research on women is carried out. It showed that research prior to 1950 predominantly concentrated on general assessments of women's responsibilities and status within the limited contexts of family, kinship, and community, with education occupying a secondary position. Moreover, the 1950s witnessed increase in studies on legal and economic status of women as reforms in personal and labour laws. Studies in the economic domain has focused on the contemporary sector of the economy, garnering interest from both planners and academic scholars. The work highlights the ignorance of the crucial role played by women in the economic sphere especially in agricultural sector in studies on the opportunities and roles of women in the economy (Mazumdar and Sharma, 1979, p. 114).

Hence, one can see that at the time of Independence, constitution provided for equality but a lot needed to be done for women and it was believed that this can be brought about only through education. And during the post-colonial period, women’s education held secondary treatment.

Need for social revolution!

Education is regarded as the most effective instrument in changing society. The expansion of education for women can be noticed throughout the colonial era but it multiplied after independence. Postcolonial gender theories in education underscore the necessity of scrutinizing the desire for social change. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, pp. 82-83) said “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak...the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.” The postcolonial and gender theorists tend to reflect on the struggles and intellectual traditions taking the position of the margins. For instance, H.S. Mirza’s (2009, p. 244) research on the representation and experiences of black women in UK higher education indicates their aspiration to "resist and rename the regulatory effects of the discourses

of educational inequity and subjugation in higher education," illustrating the marginal struggle as a pursuit of social change.

Thus, women seem to pursue social transformation via education, which is deemed crucial for a social revolution (TOI, 6 October 1959). During the freedom struggle in India, women participated in great numbers, and many showed their leadership qualities. As a result, soon after independence, Indian women began to appear in public and held important positions also. For example, in 1953, the United Nations General Assembly elected Vijay Lakshmi Pandit as its President and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was the Health Minister in the Indian Cabinet for ten years after independence. India's parliament boasted nearly 50 female members, while approximately 100 women held positions in the State Assemblies. So, there is a close link between education and women empowerment. As Sir John Colville, Governor of Bombay at the Jubilee celebrations of the Government Training College for women at Poona in 1945 emphasized "no investment is likely to yield more substantial dividends in the form of increasing literacy than money spent in furthering women's education (TOI, 27 October 1945)." Several institutions were opened to impart education to women and the need for further development was felt by all. While laying the foundation stone of Miranda House of the Women's College of Delhi University, Lady Mountbatten pointed out that,

"...there is pressing need for further facilities for women's education throughout the country... Women are already playing a great part in the public life of India today, holding responsible and leading appointments and with increasing opportunities for education and training, we can confidently expect a greater number of women to emulate them in the years to come." (TOI, 9 March 1948)

Although women participated in various capacities in diverse areas but as Ila Patel (1998, p. 162) pointed out, "women, in general, have been historically excluded from mainstream knowledge production. Whatever knowledge women possesses was either not acknowledged or not given legitimacy." However, after Independence, there was need for a dynamic policy in regard to women's education. Mrs. Hansa Mehta, Vice Chancellor of the University of Baroda, in a memorandum prepared for submission to the Committee on education of women in India highlighted the disparity in the current availability of educational institutions for boys compared to girls (TOI, 6 August 1958). She highlighted that in 1958 there were only 15,230 primary schools for girls compared with 2,62,905 schools for boys. However, she cautioned that for spreading education among girls, "we should not resort to such methods as will in any way lower the standard of women's education and thereby affect its quality." Thus, both access and quality of education were given equal importance. This was because 'women had to compete with men more or less on equal terms'. The Secretary General in 1949 stressed that "low number of women students and professionals is due to existing customs rather than discriminatory legislation... no discrimination for reasons of sex exists in the educational facilities..." (File No. 5-58-U.N-1-49. Branch UN-1. 1949, Ministry of External Affairs, National Archives of India).

It was debated that women's condition at the time of independence was miserable. The various evils like child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, girls' education beyond the primary or at the most school level was rare, most educated girls lapsed into the role of ordinary housewives on marriage, under-nourishment, and denial of access to the outside world were major obstacles to girls (TOI, 16 September 1984). The society and orthodox beliefs and customs were blamed for the poor state of education of women. It was argued that the inferior status given to women in the society is responsible for their backwardness (Mehta, 1969, p. 14). The discrimination within the household between son and daughter was another reason why parents were

reluctant to spend on daughter's education whereby son was seen as future bread-winners while daughters were seen to become members of another family after marriage. Hence there was a need to launch a campaign against these social evils hampering women's development. Further parents' unwillingness to enroll their daughters to schools, particularly to co-educational institutions was pointed out by Miss Kapila Khandwalla, Secretary of the Education Department of Bombay Municipal Corporation as one of the important causes (TOI, 6 August 1958). The main reasons were dearth of female teachers and lack of facilities. Attempts were made by the women holding various positions to pressurize the government to look into these matters and take necessary steps.

S. Shridevi (1972, pp. 71-72), Principal of University College for Women, Hyderabad argued that various measures by the government since Independence like 'rights to property and divorce and other privileges for equality with men has caused a silent revolution with tremendous changes affecting women in different classes.' The participation of women in the labour market, increased scope of educated women in employment, laws against dowry, Hindu Marriage Act, and similar efforts have brought silent revolution in fostering their education. As it is rightly said "revolutions can be demanding. They exact a heavy price, especially from those who symbolize it" (TOI, 16 September 1984). Discussions and debates regarding the curriculum suited to women began. It has been proposed that specialized education for women serves as a comprehensive solution for their educational needs. A distinct curriculum for girls, encompassing Home Science and related subjects, was proposed by many, while others advocated for a unified curriculum for both boys and girls.

Development of Education

The country's independence in 1947 marked a pivotal moment in India's history and brought a new era with regard to expansion of the education system. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the first Education Minister convened the All India Educational Conference in 1948 and mandated the provision of free and compulsory education within a period of 16 years (Mathur, 1973, p. 111). Further a provision was made under Article 45 of the Constitution 'enjoining upon the State to strive to provide within 10 years of the working of the Constitution, free and compulsory education to all children till they attain the age of 14 years' (Education in Eighteen Years of Freedom, 1965, pp. 17-18). Hence, the policy debates on education began and government made efforts towards development of education immediately after independence.

Women's education gathered momentum in postcolonial period. The first initiative by the government was formation of the University Education Commission of 1948-9, under Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. It dedicated a chapter to women's education. But this Commission comprised of all-male membership and stressed the need for education of women. However, it stressed, "the greatest profession of women is and probably will continue to be that of the homemaker" (Report of the University Education Commission, 1948-49, p. 345). The discussion emphasized the significance of women's education for national development, highlighting the necessity of educating women specifically as women and preparing them for domestic roles and early life. Consequently, it is evident that the report had a bias in its recommendations about the educational needs of women. Some of the subjects thought to be apt for women were home economics, teaching, nursing, and fine arts (ibid, pp. 346-49). Though the recommendations were to expand the education of women and emphasized on need of fineness and specialization through appropriate educational course. The first Five Year Plan viewed education vital for planned development. Taking recommendations from the University Education Commission, it stated, "everyone realizes the significance of the problem of women's education in the special circumstances of our country today and the need for adopting special measures for solving it. The general purpose and objective of women's education cannot of course be different from the purpose and objectives of

men's education. There are, however, vital differences in the way in which this purpose has to be realized." This set the path for further development in the realm of their education and subsequently efforts were made for their educational advancement.

Afterwards, in May 1958, the National Committee on Women's Education was established, chaired by Smt. Durgabai Deshmukh to investigate girls' education, vocational training for them and to propose appropriate measures to be taken. The committee submitted a comprehensive report to the government in January 1959. The primary finding was that 'the education of girls and women had been sadly neglected in the past and consequently there was a wide disparity in the education of men and women and boys and girls at all levels and stages of education' (The National Council for Women's Education, First Annual Report, 1959-60, p. 1). It suggested special measures to be initiated exclusively for girls and women and provide specific funds for rapid progress. The Committee further felt the need for centre and state level guidance, leadership, and advice.

In September 1959, the National Council for Women's Education was established to counsel the government on all issues pertaining to the education of girls and women. Some of its important functions included 'to advise government on issues relating to the education of girls at school level and of adult women; to suggest policies, programmes, targets and priorities for the expansion and improvement of the education of girls and women; to suggest suitable measures for educating public opinion, in favor of the education of girls and women; to recommend collection of specific data on problems relating to the education of girls and women and to recommend sample surveys and research projects and/or seminars' (ibid, pp. 2-3). One of the important recommendations of the council was giving encouragement to the technical and vocational training of girls. It proposed a scheme for the establishment of Junior Technical Schools/ Polytechnics for girls and women in each state (ibid, pp. 15-16).

Educating the public opinion regarding the necessity and significance of girls' and women's education was also considered vital by the Council. It attached much importance to this aspect and stressed on the strenuous efforts required for educating the public opinion especially in the backward states and rural areas. Moreover, it further 'appealed the members of National and State Councils and to voluntary organisations and social workers to organize intensive and sustained campaigns for the purpose' (ibid, p. 18).

In its second annual meeting, the National Council for Women's Education recommended 'special programme' for overcoming the difficulties in way to girls' education and to increase the enrolment rates for both boys and girls. This programme was available exclusively for girls and included 'attendance scholarships, stipends, free uniforms, provision for hostels or subsidised transport, construction of quarters or payment of village allowance for women teachers, appointment of school mothers or other similar schemes' (The National Council of Women's Education, Second Annual Report, 1960-61, pp. 2-3.). It was to be a centrally sponsored scheme as it realised that state governments lack the means for these special measures. The Union government thus sponsored a token special project for "Expansion of Girls Education and Training of Women Teacher" with an outlay of Rs. 2.10 crores. Also, it recommended appointment of a high-level woman officer in charge of girls' education in each state (ibid, pp. 3-5).

In 1962, the Government established a commission on differentiation of curricula for boys and girls, headed by Mrs. Hansa Mehta. The objective was to examine the necessity of curriculum and to suggest standardized curricula for boys and girls up to the primary level. The Committee advocated for a fundamental home-science curriculum for both genders at the middle stage and the incorporation of crafts, handiwork, or productive labor into the general courses at the secondary level (Pandey, 1987, p. 3). It realized that there is 'psychological

differences between the two sexes, not out of sex but social conditions' and the stereotypes- 'masculine and feminine do more harm than good' to the society. Further, it aimed to work towards equal access to all subjects and to organize a campaign against social attitudes, while providing some special courses for girls (Aggarwal, 1984, p. 396).

In 1963, the National Council for Women's Education established a committee chaired by M. Bhaktavatsalam, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, to propose strategies for advancing education. Popularly referred to as the Bhaktavatsalam Committee, it reviewed the reasons for the insufficient public support for the advancement of girls' education in the backward states, specifically Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, as well as some overarching issues affecting the nation. The committee suggested that "the strategy for the development of the education of girls and women will have to take two forms. The first is to emphasize the special programmes recommended by the National Committee on women's education and the second is to give attention to the education of girls at all stages and in all sectors as an integral part of the general programmes for the expansion and improvement of education" (quoted in Pandey, 1987, p.4). The report underlined the need for Central assistance in the primary and secondary stages. At the primary stage, the training and employment of female teachers; the provision for free books, writing materials and clothing for girls; as well as housing for female teachers. At the secondary level, the focus shifted to establishing separate schools for girls; providing hostels; offering free books, writing material and clothes to girls; and increasing the recruitment and appointment of female teachers. The urgency for constructing appropriate school structures was also highlighted.

The Education Commission (1964-66) fully supported the suggestions of the earlier committees. It was formed under the chairmanship of Prof. D.S. Kothari, Chairman, UGC. The commission endorsed the expansion and improvement of girls' education across all stages and sectors. It further provided following three important recommendations,

- "1. Education of women should be regarded as a major programmes for some years to come and bold and determined effort should be made to face difficulties involved and to close the existing gap between the education of men and women in as short a time as possible;
2. Special schemes should be prepared for this purpose and the funds required for them should be provided on a priority basis; and
3. Both at the Centre and in the States, there should be a special machinery to look after the education of girls and women. It should bring together officials and non-officials in the planning and implementation of the programmes for women's education." (Report of the Education Commission, 1964-66, para 6.55, p. 138)

The report further discussed the training and employment of women. It highlighted the growing involvement of women in the workforce, as they pursue both part-time and full-time careers beyond their domestic responsibilities. The careers which were regarded as good for women included teaching, nursing and social service, and others (Ibid, para 6.57, pp. 138-9). Thus expansion in these fields and others were regarded as vital necessity of the time.

Moreover, enrolment was increasing but there was problem of retention as girls would subsequently withdraw (Shah, 1969, p. 42). This issue is emphasised in the Report of National Committee on Women's Education 1958-59 and the Education Commission 1964-65, which officially acknowledged that the drop-out rate among girls was significantly greater than that of boys. The various factors responsible for this included economic, social and physical. Balaji Pandey (1987, p. 13) pointed out that poverty and familial responsibilities like

domestic work, caregiving for younger siblings, and in rural regions, the procurement of water, fuel and feed, were contributing factors to their drop out. Therefore, the foremost concern for the government was to retain girl students in the schools and colleges.

Looking forward

The preceding discussion clearly indicates that in the post-colonial period, education received greater attention and the government made efforts to expand it. Attempts were made to make education accessible to all without compromising its quality. Women were encouraged to participate in various fields, and they also proved their ability by playing pivotal roles in various capacities. They held important positions in administrative, educational, medical, judicial, and nursing professions. The educated women insisted that basic education up to matriculation be rendered compulsory and free for all women, encompassing subjects such as psychology, social welfare, nutrition, philosophy, moral science, basic mathematics, sciences, languages, and social studies.

As in the colonial period, the major concern was getting girls out of homes into the schools, same was the case during the post-colonial period. There were prejudices and superstitions prevailing in the society and this was the reason why it took decades to encourage women to come out and join the institutions. The context used to encourage them was that education would help them manage home in a better way and thus the education would be '*lady-like*' to promote feminine subjects for taking care of household affairs and become good wives and mother. The contemporary writings suggest that the orthodox beliefs and customs contributed to the condition of women's education. The differentiation within the family was also responsible for the slow growth as 'sons were considered more important as they are the bread-winners and future props of the family, while daughters to be married and become members of another family.' Also, parents were hesitant to enroll their daughters in the co-educational institutions. The absence of female teachers and the scarcity of girls' schools and colleges were identified as significant factors hindering girls' access to education, particularly in rural regions.

Over time, the concept of education changed. Education was regarded as a means for national development. Therefore, education was becoming more and more functional and job oriented. The learned women of the time pointed out that during the 1960s women were coming out in public and taking full-time jobs along with husbands. Thus, women made their appearance felt in all walks of life as lawyers, engineers, architects, artists, journalists, business executives, typists, apart from the traditional vocations of doctors, nurses, and teachers (Bai, 1969, pp. 22-23). Women wanted to be economically independent. Thus, the changing mind set encouraged the emancipation of women and progress in their education. Women were encouraged to take vocational training and some government institutions provided free education and scholarships.

The Government of India and the State Governments significantly contributed to the advancement of women's education. After 1965 several Committees and Commissions were formed by the Government for the development of education. Later, the year 1975 can be regarded as watershed when United Nations declared 1975-85 as women's decade. Moreover, the period after independence paved the way for further development which bore fruits in the coming years.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that the period under survey was a transition phase in the history of modern India as the country was moving from being colonial to an independent country. There were many challenges before the newly independent country and education was one of them. The Government began to give importance to

the spread of education immediately after attaining freedom. Efforts were made to remove illiteracy and provide education to all. Within this, women's education was also promoted.

Women began to play vital role in the process of nation building process and held important positions at all levels, however their representation was low. As a result, several institutions, schools and colleges were established so as to attract girls and retain them. Hence, it brought about a silent revolution and contributed to their empowerment. The writings during the period suggest that education was mainly geared to become 'lady-like' where subjects pertaining to household needs were emphasized for women. This was because there were many prejudices against women in the society. Nevertheless, it is important to note that women gradually began to come out of their homes and got engaged in employment and gained economic independence. Voices were raised for the provision of free and compulsory education for girls till matriculation. They began to study 'non-traditional' subjects also.

The government initiatives began with formation of various bodies like University Education Commission (1948-49), National Committee on Women's Education (1958), National Council for Women's Education (1959), Committee on Differentiation for boys and girls (1962), National Council for Women's Education (1963), Education Commission (1964-66) during the period under study. The Five-Year plans also provided impetus to women's education. These suggested various measures and recommendations to promote women's education and succeeded to a large extent and paved the way for further development.

So, one can note that efforts were made to raise issues and provide solutions to the problems like provision of female teachers, hostel facilities, separate institutes for girls, promoting vocational and technical education, etc. The result could be seen now as women make their presence felt in every arena of public sphere and are doing well. They are successfully managing their personal and professional lives. And the background for this was prepared during the post-colonial period.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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