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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN INDIA HOW FAR THINGS HAVE
CHANGED, NOW AND THEN: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

Education is a fundamental means to bring any desired change in society, which is an accepted fact throughout the world. Education helps to continue communication with known and unknown persons through technology and mass media. Further it helps to discriminate between wrong and right. Any attempt to deal with the issues of women's education like access or enrolment, wastage and co-education etc is likely to be unrewarding unless the issues are viewed in their social context or we can say that neither the goals of women's education, nor the issues relating to it can be properly understood except within the societal context. Women education in India has been a major preoccupation of both the government and civil society as educated women can play a very important role in the development of the country. Education of a woman is the most powerful tool of change of position in society. It also brings a reduction in inequalities and functions as a means of improving their status within the family. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to trace the changes in the education of women during the pre-independent and post independent era in India.

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INTRODUCTION

The social context refers to the various facets of the overall socio-economic environment in which a person or a group lives. It includes the family and the extended kin group, the caste hierarchy, the economic conditions and class relations, the religious beliefs and practices and the social demography of the region (Foundation, 2004). Women constitute almost half of the population of the world. Education for women is the best way to improve the health, nutrition and economic status of a household that constitute a micro unit of a nation's economy. Lack of woman's education is an impediment to the country's economic development. The period of British India is characterized by curriculum change, regional variation, differential responses by the region and religious groups, and co-education (Channa, 2001). By the social reformers in 1900s, the need of women's education was emphasized. By the 1920s, leaders and reformers believed that educating girls meant educating families. By 1929, women were given the right to vote and female marriage age was mandated as a minimum of 14 years. Women leaders around the turn of that century were educated elite.

Women's group activity before the 1930s centered on welfare, social reforms, social services and education, but not on political activity. Gandhi was one of the first to encourage women to come out of seclusion and to call for women's education and political activity. There were basically four agents or we can say sources of female education namely, Christian missionaries, Indian social reformers, Philanthropic foreigners and the British government. Voluntary organizations were also very active in creating favorable public opinion and changing parent's views on educating daughters. During pre-independence period, education suffered from limited resources, but expansion occurred nonetheless. Madras and Bombay pioneered women's education. Parda system in the north and early marriage in the south hindered girl's education. Parental apathy and the social prejudice also accounted for regional variations. Separate school for girls were founded initially in Bengal and other provinces with strong missionary activity. Coeducation was accepted in Madras and Bombay. Most supported different curricula for boys and girls. Hindus wanted to reform society by changing the status of women from Christian and Hindu. By the 1940s, the constitution incorporated the idea that men and women were equal. Women constitute almost half of the population in the world.

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But the hegemonic masculine ideology made them suffer a lot as they were denied equal opportunities in different parts of the world. The rise of feminist ideas has, however, led to the tremendous improvement of women's condition throughout the world in recent times. Access to education has been one of the most pressing demands of these women's rights movements. Women education in India has also been a major preoccupation of both the government and civil society as educated women can play a very important role in the development of the country. India is poised to emerge as one of the most developed nations by 2020, more literate, knowledgeable and economically at the forefront.

Expansion of women's education during colonial period

Women education in Colonial India witnessed an essential expansion. Various movements were launched to make women of the country literate. Furthermore, this progress journeyed through the years and influenced the modern Indian education system. In the British period there was revival of interest in women's education in India. During this period, various socio religious Movements led by eminent persons like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar emphasized on women's education in India. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Periyar were leaders of the lower castes in India who took various initiatives to make education available to the women of India. Generally the status of education in the early nineteenth century was unsatisfactory.

While backwardness characterized all education, the state of girl's was much worse. There was An increase in the number of institutions from the year 1921-22 until 1936-37 which declined After 1946-47 because during this period, many ineffective institutions were closed down but Despite of it, the enrolment of girls increased over the years in the co-educational institutions. Women's education made a head start during 1921-47 but the development was confined to the urban area only because most of the women's education was in private hands and the activities of private organization were restricted to the urban areas. Lack of resources inhibited the government from taking it to rural areas. It was only Gandhi's call for universal primary education that social activity spread to the rural areas. Private education contributed greatly to the expansion of women's education until independence. Education in general and women's education in particular, continued to suffer from limited financial recourses during 1921-47, since the British government allocated meager funds to education. Girl's education involved higher investment for various reasons like; separate schools were to be set up because parents were not willing to send their girl child to coeducational schools. Also some-times hostels had to be provided where the distance between home and school was not commutable; escorts had to be provided to reach them home in areas where they were traditionally not allowed to go outdoors or were secluded, women teachers had to be trained since parents were reluctant to let their daughters come into contact with male teachers.

Need of women education

In India, women achieve far less education that of men. There has been a sincere effort to improve the education attainment of women by both government and voluntary Organizations. The changes in the policies and infrastructural supports on primary, secondary and Higher education reflects the initiatives of the Government of India towards women education. The need of education for the women folk was recognized by the social reformers long back i.e.in pre-independent times as well as in post-independent period. The need of women education has been recognized very crucial because no matter how rich or vast a nation is, without an effective, efficient, adequate and functional education for all its citizens (men and women) education which is relevant to its immediate needs, goals and objectives, such a nation would find it difficult to stand on its own. The brand of education being advocated is that type of education in which is embedded the spirit of self realization and all that are needed for the country's overall development like mass literacy, economic empowerment etc. The need for women education is also informed by the fact that purposeful occupational achievement and satisfaction is ensured by deep self-awareness and understanding which can only be achieved through the provision of effective and functional education. The importance of women's education was realized by the policy makers and social reformers. It was realized that education will empower the women folk to know and ask for their rights to education, health, shelter, food clothing etc also it would empower them to fight against every form of discrimination against their folk, assert themselves about their right to equal treatment with their men counterpart as bonafide citizens of this nation along with it, it would enable the women take decisions and accept responsibilities for taking such decisions concerning themselves. It would give economic power to the women and there by enable those to contribute their quota to the economic growth of the nation also it will empower the women scientifically through exposure to science and technological education for the challenges of the present technological age and information computer technology break through unfolding world- wide. It would help women to reduce maternal and infant mortality through improved nutrition, improved child rearing practice, health care and prevention against killer diseases. It would avail women with the opportunity of participating keenly in the world of sophisticated politics and governance as enlightened citizens. So there were many advantages of having education for the women.

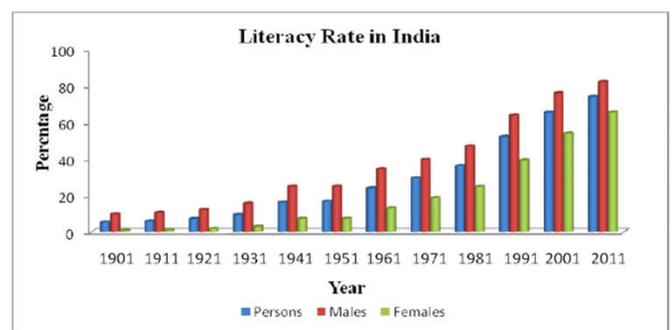
Critical reflections on the Current context

The growth of women's education in rural areas is very slow. This obviously means that still large womenfolk of our country are illiterate, the weak, backward and exploited. Women Education in Modern India is traced back to the years after the independence of India. In the present times, the government of India takes measures to provide education to all women of the country. Women literacy rate seemingly rose in the modern days. This has

actually helped women to achieve top positions at work place and also at society. Gender discrimination still persists in India and lot more needs to be done in the field of women's education. The gap in the Male-female literacy rate is just a simple indicator. While the male literacy rate was more than 75% according to the 2001 Census, the female literacy rate was 54.16% and according to the 2011 Census, the male literacy rate is 82.14 while female literacy rate is 65.46 only. There is a steady growth of female literacy rates in both rural and urban regions in India. In the year 1951, the rural female literacy was 12 per cent and urban female literacy was 34.59 per cent. This situation had remarkably improved with in fifty years and reached to higher levels of 59 and 80 percent in rural and urban regions respectively. Though there has been a steady upward trend in both the rural and urban female literacy rates, it is observed that the rural female literacy is increasing much faster than that of urban. Women's education got a fillip after the country got independence in 1947 and the government has taken various measures to provide education to all Indian women. As a result women's literacy rate has grown over the three decades and the Growth of female literacy has in fact been higher than that of male literacy rate. While in 1971 Only 22% of Indian women were literate, by the end of 2001 54.16% female were literate. The Growth of female literacy rate is 14.87% as compared to 11.72 % of that of male literacy rate.

The constitution of India guarantees the right to equality to all Indian women without discrimination. The literacy rate before independence was 2.6% rose in 1961 to 15.3% and 50% by the year 2001. And now, according to the 2011 Census, the male literacy rate is 82.14 while female literacy rate is 65.46. Kerala and Mizoram are the only states in India that have achieved universal female literacy rates. The improvement in social and economic status of women is said to be one of the reasons for literacy. In cities the literacy rate is almost equal between girls and boys in the country however the rate in rural areas continues to be less than the boys. 40% of the centers under NFE), non formal education programs are set apart for women. According to statistics of women education in India, today 0.3 million NFE centers have primary education to 0.12 million girls out of 7.42 million children. However in tribal areas there is not much of a gender bias as compared to all other castes, tribal community statistics show lower male ratio in spite of much low income, literacy, education and other facilities several efforts are being made towards women education and empowerment. The government is taking steps to increase the rate of women education and employment. Literacy rate in India have risen sharply from 18.3% in 1951 to 64.8% in 2001 in which enrolment of women in education have also risen sharply 7% to 54.16%. Despite the importance of women education unfortunately only 39% of women are literate among 64% of the man. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, plan and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in difference spheres. From the fifth five year plan (1974 – 78) onwards has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women have been recognized

as the central issue in determining the status of women. The National Commission of Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the right and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1992) to the constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of panchayat and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local level. Gender Bias in curriculum still exists as long ago as 1965, the Indian government agreed to rewrite textbooks so that men and women would not be portrayed in gender stereotyped roles. However, a study of Indian textbooks done in the 1980s found that men were the main characters in the majority of lessons. In these lessons, men held high-prestige occupations and were portrayed as strong, adventurous, and intelligent. In contrast, when women were included they were depicted as weak and helpless, often as the victims of abuse and beatings (Puja Mondal). These depictions are strong barriers for improving women's position in society.



(Source: Census 2011)

Fig. 1. Literacy rates in India

Government interventions

The Indian government has expressed a strong commitment towards education for all, however, India still has one of the lowest female literacy rates in Asia. This low level of literacy not only has a negative impact on women's lives but also on their families' lives and on their country's economic development. Numerous studies show that illiterate women have high levels of fertility and mortality, poor nutritional status, low earning potential, and little autonomy within the household. A woman's lack of education also has a negative impact on the health and well being of her children. Government of India has recently launched the Saakshar Bharat Mission for female literacy, which aims to reduce female illiteracy. The Constitution of India Guarantees free primary school education for both boys and girls up to age 14. Education in India plays a vital role in the overall development of the country. This proves that educated women promote education in their family. Constitution of India not only grants equality to women but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women for neutralizing the socio-economic, educational and political did Article 15(3) make a special provision enabling the State to make affirmative discriminations in favor of women. Article 15

prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex etc. Article 14 confers on men and women equal rights and opportunities in the political, economic and social spheres. Article 39(c) ensures equal pay for equal work. Article 39(a) further mentions that the State shall direct its policy towards securing all citizens, men and women, equally, the right to means of livelihood, above all, the constitution imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen through Articles 15 (A) (e) to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women. Article 42 directs the State to make provision for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. The National Perspective Plan for Women (NPP) (1988-2000) drafted by a core-group of experts is more or less a long term policy document advocating a holistic approach for the development of women. The National Plan of Action for Women (NPA) adopted in 1976 became a guiding document for the development of women till 1988 when a National Perspective Plan for Women was formulated.

Educational Provisions in Centrally Sponsored Schemes in School Education (CSS)

Major Schemes for Elementary Education

1. Operation Black Board
2. Teacher Education
3. Education Guarantee Scheme & Alternative and Innovative Education (EGS & AIE)
4. Mid-day Meal Scheme
5. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)
6. Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)
7. Shiksha Karmi
8. Mahila Samakhya
9. District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)
10. National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL)
11. Lok Jumbish
12. Janshala Programme
13. Padhe Bitiya Badhe Bitiya
14. Ladali Scheme

Major Schemes for Secondary Education

1. Access and Equity
2. Quality Improvement in Schools (QIS)
3. ICT in Schools
4. Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC)
5. Vocationalisation of Education

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since the educational status of women/girls was very low at the time of independence, various measures have been taken to improve their condition as per the constitutional provision for equality to all citizens including girls. Various committees were set up to suggest ways to promote education of girls. The Secondary Education Commission, the Education Commission, the NPE 1968 and 1986 made special recommendations for improving girl's education at various levels. All five year plans made provisions for various initiatives and schemes to accelerate girls' education and women empowerment. Major programmes of UEE have special gender focus especially the DPEP and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan special schemes/programmes are launched under SSA to equalize educational opportunities among girls especially the girls from disadvantaged groups. In spite of the forceful intervention by a bastion of female privilege, feminist critics, constitutional guarantees, protecting laws and sincere efforts by the state governments and central government through various schemes and programmes over the last 66 years and above all, the United Nation's enormous pressure with regard to the uplift of the plight of women in terms education is still in the state of an enigma in India for several reasons. Still large womenfolk of our country are illiterate, the weak, backward and exploited. Moreover education is also not available to all equally. Gender inequality is reinforced in education which is proved by the fact that the literacy rate for the women is only 65.46% against 82.14% of men as per 2011 Census. The rate of school drop outs is also found to be comparatively higher in case of women. This higher rate of illiteracy of women is undoubtedly attributing for women dependence on men and to play a subordinate role. Only literacy can help women to understand the Indian's constitutional and legislative provisions that are made to strengthen them. Thus promoting education among women is of great important in empowering them to accomplish their goals in par with men in different spheres of life.

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