



HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA - A GENDERED ISSUE

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ABSTRACT:-

Higher education may be designated as one of the most important tool in accomplishing economic and socio-cultural progress and human development in any country of the world. Therefore higher education should be within the reach of every citizen of the country, regardless, of gender or caste. The Indian Constitution has granted 'Education' as a fundamental right to all its citizens. India ranks third in the world in the field of higher education. Establishment of a large number of under graduate colleges, universities and institutes with increasing student enrollment, and particularly enrollment of women students has been witnessed throughout the country. Unfortunately, inspite of such encouraging facts and figures higher education in India is a gendered issue. The present paper attempts to historically review the status of women in higher education in India; to enumerate and understand the causes of gender disparity in higher education; and to find means to eradicate such inequalities and empower women through higher education. Through a review of literature it has been found that the root cause of gender inequality in higher education in India lies in the traditional role expectation of the Indian women and in the socio-economic structure of the country. Apart from this the rural-urban divide is also a major cause of unequal availability of opportunities among women themselves. Therefore the most important task of the government, both at central and state level, as well as, the institutions of education is to sensitize the parents towards gender issues. There is also need for changes in the structural, curricular and pedagogical aspects of higher education. Higher education needs to be more accessible and employment friendly in order to become meaningful and beneficiary for women.

KEYWORDS: Higher Education, Gender Disparity, Socio-Economic Structure, Empowerment of Women.

INTRODUCTION :

Today higher education has occupied a centre stage in the development strategies of countries the world over. Under the domain of higher education there are innumerable programmes. There are traditional general subject disciplines like sciences, humanities, arts, mathematics, social and cultural sciences. Programmes in technical, vocational, education and training, along with training for teacher education, management education, and education for service and hospitality sector and others are also part of higher education. Growth and diversification is prevalent in the sector with the advancement of technology and research. There is also a gradual shift in the forms of education and training. At present higher educational



institutions like university, college, institute etc. have been complimented with e-learning, barefoot colleges and work-study programmes.

After China and the United States, India occupies the third position in the higher education sector in the world. In the Indian context "University" means a University established or incorporated by or under a Central Act, a Provincial Act or a State Act and includes any such institution as may, in consultation with the University concerned, be recognized by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in accordance with the regulations made in this regard under the UGC Act, 1956 (<http://mhrd.gov.in>). Today there are about 677 universities in India which is 34 times more than that was in 1950. After independence there were only twenty universities in India. There has also been a phenomenal rise in the number of colleges in India. At present we have more than 37000 colleges in the country. Higher education is also offered by several private institutes which provide various professional courses in India. Higher education through distance learning has also gained importance. In spite of such wide spread and highly developed system of higher education; it is not available to all eligible students.

In India as in other countries of the world, a student's access to higher education is dependent on a number of factors. The academic performance of a student in primary and secondary education determines his admission to higher education. Parents' economic situation and the value of education in the family also determine a student's access to higher education. Other factors like government policy, fee structure, scholarship plays a major role in a student's desire for opting higher education. A student's social environment as well as the physical distance to educational institutions also plays a decisive role in student's participation in higher education. Statistics show that enrollment in higher education has increased in leaps and bounds since independence.

In matters related to women's participation in higher education we find that there has been a rapid growth in a number of enrollments. At the eve of independence less than 10% of the total enrolment in higher education was that of women which has now it has risen to 41.40%. Total enrolment in higher education has been estimated to be 28.56 million with 15.87 million boys and 12.69 million girls (<http://mhrd.gov.in>). Unfortunately there still exists gender disparity in higher education in India. One of the greatest failures of higher education is to inculcate gender equality in the Indian society.

OBJECTIVES

Through a review of literature the present paper attempts to:

- Historically review the status of women in higher education in India;
- Enumerate and understand the causes of gender disparity in higher education; and
- Find means to eradicate such disparities and empower women through higher education.

History of Women in Higher Education in India

Examining the history of women education in India, one finds that the Indian society had type casted women as being forced to have certain 'womanly' qualities which constrained them to a subsidiary role to men. However a study of the history of Indian education does not reflect such disparity. In the Vedic ages, Indian women enjoyed social prestige and educational rights.

"In the beautiful days of the Vedic period of India the glory of which still surrounds the country like a faint halo, women took part freely in the social and political life of the country and, in the celebration of religious functions and rituals, they had a special place of importance assigned to them.... They were also earnest students of philosophy and took active part in subtle philosophical debates.... Such social disabilities as purdah and child marriage were entirely unknown.... Their rights of inheritance and succession were fully recognized, whether they were widows or daughters" (Moles, 2000). The names of female scholars and sages like Vac, Romasa, Ambhrni, Gargi, Khona are found in the Vedic scriptures. They were the 'brahmavadinis' who were highly intelligent and greatly learned women, and chose the path of Vedic studies. We also come across the names of Lopamudra, Sikata, Nivavari, Apala and others who were among the famous composers in Rigveda. A corrugation in this status was evident in the later Vedic period, which grew and reached the zenith in the medieval era where women education was almost forbidden. In the pre colonial years women's education was

limited to the household arts; at best, some women in propertied families might learn to keep accounts, and women from 'respectable' families might learn to read as a 'pious recreation'. With the advent of the Christian missionaries started the modern era in women education.

The earliest female school in British India was Hedges Girls' School (1760) followed by Rev. May's school at Chinsurah (1818). This was followed by William Carey's school for girls at Sreerampore (1819). In 1819 the Calcutta Female Juvenile Society was established to provide organized provision for educating native girls. The Native Female Society along with the Calcutta Female Juvenile Society gave considerable impetus in spreading female education. Miss Mary Anne Cook was the first women educator to be sent from England to teach Indian girls. Miss Cook worked relentlessly and established eight girls' schools in 1821 followed by four more in the following year. These schools imparted education in 3Rs along with History Geography and needle work. Women's education gained strong foot hold in Madras and Bombay also. The first school in Madras was established in 1821 and the number grew rapidly thereafter. The first school in Bombay was founded in 1824 and rose rapidly in the next decade to ten. Girls' schools were also established Benaras, Allahabad, Mirzapore etc.

In the 1850s, both the colonial Government and various Hindu reformers became conscious about the need for female literacy. Female education in Bengal was ushered in with the establishment of Bethune School in 1849 by the late Honourable J.E.D. Bethune, for the education of the daughters of Native Gentlemen. Hereafter female education movement gained momentum in Bengal and gradually with the help of Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Debendranath Tagore and many other progressive leaders, women's emancipation gained inspiration and flowed in many directions.

Women education in India gained enormous momentum in India with the beginning of Nationalist struggle in the early twentieth century. The international concept of feminism disembarked in India and Indian women started demanding their rights, specially educational and political rights. Education became a spring-board for the emergence and rise of new women leaders. Educated women bequeathed liberal equality as a basic foundational value for nation in the making. However women education was prevalent only among a small section of people in society. The literacy rate for women as reported by Hunter Commission 1882 was only 0.2% which rose to 6% only in 1947. Since independence the number of women student enrolment in higher education has raised significantly. In the academic year 2010-11 women enrolment has increased up to 41.5 per cent.

Causes of Gender Disparity in Higher Education

Though there has been a gradual rise in literacy rate among women in India very few have stepped into the arena of higher education. Today India alone has about 30% of the world's total illiterate population. Out of this vast illiterate population about 56.3% are women and 24.7% are men. The literacy rate among rural women is 46.1% as compared to 72.9% among urban women. Literacy rates among rural and urban men is much higher and stands at 70.7% and 86.3% respectively (as per 2011 Census data). Thus gender disparity is a stark reality in India at all levels of education, especially in higher education. There are a number of causes behind this disparity. The traditional role expectation of the Indian women and the socio-economic structure of the country are vitally responsible for such inequality.

• Patriarchal Society

From time immemorial the Indian society is plagued by distorted values of religion and caste coupled with class distinctions which breeds sense of the inferiority and superiority. Religious dogma, superstition along with regressive patriarchy prevails vehemently in rural India. Though there is a narrow gender gap at the primary stage of education, this gap widens in the secondary and the higher stages, especially among the rural and low income group of the population. Parents do not invest in higher education as daughters do not serve as bread-earners but are married off. Parents feel it wiser to save money for dowry rather than to invest it in higher education. Female students of private schools super seeds those in the government school not only because of the facilities available but socio-economic background at home which supports them.

• Access and Retention

Gender discrimination begins with access to schooling. Access and retention problems become very significant at higher levels of education. It has been found that the GPI at lower secondary is 0.73 which drops significantly at upper secondary levels 0.67 (UNESCO, 2004). Girls and women, entering higher education, face a number of cultural and social problems which are often overlooked by the policy makers. Issues like- long distances to school, poor sanitation facilities, and poverty etc. impact access to education.

• Sexual Harassment and Violence

Public spaces in India do not make women feel secure and confident. Transporting girls to school and back safely, especially where secondary schools and universities are far away from their homes, is a vital policy measure that has received negligible attention. It is one of the major constraints that prevent parents from sending their daughters to colleges or universities.

• Unequal Payment in Job Market and Under Valuation of Female Labour

In the Indian society division of labour between male and female is very prominent. While male labour is associated with the job market, female labour is confined to household jobs and child-rearing. Female labour has low valuation in the labour market as it is often associated with fulfilling domestic responsibilities including child rearing. Women are culturally associated with the institutions of marriage and family and hence stand at a disadvantageous position in the labour market. Gender inequalities deepen with poverty, backwardness of society in terms of caste and geographical location (particularly in underdeveloped rural areas). However it has also been seen that gender-differentiated ideologies cut across all social groups, explaining why girls lag behind boys in access to and participation in education throughout the Indian society. In India constitutional provisions guarantee equality between men and women and prohibit any discrimination on the basis of sex or other considerations in the recruitment and promotion of public personnel. Yet constraints prevail, preventing women from fully enjoying their constitutional rights. In the job market there is unequal pay for equal labour in case of women labour which deters women from higher education.

• Fortification of Gender Discrimination in the Present Education System

The present education system breeds discrimination among men and women. For instance, educational institutions endorse stereotypes pertaining to responsibilities, roles and opportunities, to which children are originally exposed in family settings. In school this social knowledge relating to gender is constructed, validated and perpetuated through textbooks, pedagogy skills, assessment and the teachers themselves. Most of the textbooks characterize female characters as dependent, weak, shy and confined within the four walls of her house while male characters are strong, independent, inventive, extrovert and dependable and fit for the outer world. A thorough review of textbooks, pedagogy skills, assessment system and the school milieu is needed at the earliest.

• Rural Urban Divide

The rural-urban divide is also a major cause of unequal availability of opportunities among women themselves. Urban women are well off than their poor rural counterparts. Urban women have greater access to higher education. Urban women from high socio-economic background enjoy the support of the parents and the society. Higher education enables urban women to secure jobs of their own choice. Whereas higher education for girls from high socio-economic rural area make them fit for the marriage market only.

Means to Eradicate such Disparities and Empower Women through Higher Education

Almost half of the population in India is occupied by women. They form half of the human resource of the country. Progress of the nation is impossible if the development of women workforce is neglected. Women access in the domain of education has not been fairly treated. There are different viewpoints on the question of women participation in higher education. It is often viewed that the purpose of women's education is to equip

them to become better wives and mother. This view believes that women's present education which aims at economic independence of women leading to access of her rights is entirely irrelevant in their lives. It is only waste of time and this does not help them to solve the problems of their daily life. According to this view modern educated women are neither happy nor contended nor socially useful. Women become misfit in performing her social as well as economic duties. The family as well as the institution where she works, both suffers. However this outdated view- point needs to be eliminated. Modern attitude visualizes education as an instrument for women's equality and development.

Women education helps women both individually and socially. Education helps women to deal with the problems of her life, her family, her society and nation, and inculcates confidence in her. It is possible for an educated woman to easily understand the demerits of early marriage and high birth rate. Educated mothers encourage gender parity among their children in issues related to health care, nutrition, education and even career. The fruits of education are enjoyed not only by the woman concerned but it passes to her family in later life. The commission on the higher education for women, University of Madras in 1979 aptly observed: for women and men, college education is necessary for character formation, ability to earn, creative self expression and personal development. Overall development of a society depends on the development of its total members. But if half of its members (women) lag behind, obviously it will create impediment to the development. Therefore the most important task of the government, both at central and state level, as well as, the institutions of education is to sensitize the parents towards gender issues. There is also need for changes in the structural, curricular and pedagogical aspects of higher education.

The following measures can help eradicate gender disparity in higher education and in the society at large.

• Gender Sensitization among Parents

Sensitization towards gender issues should be inculcated in parents at the very onset of parent-hood. Workshops for pregnant women along with their husbands should be organised where gender sensitivity is the core issue alongside with gender equality and value of girl child. Persons participating in these activities must be given a handout which informs them about the various welfare schemes and policies of the government. The Central Government Scheme of 'Beti Banchao, Beti Padao' is an apt example of such policy. During admission of a child to school, parents must be counselled properly and guided as to what are the needs and requirements of school going children. These sessions must also be able to raise awareness on different social issues and promote gender equality along with gender sensitivity. Parents must be counseled as to why they should not discriminate between children on the grounds of sex. They should be made aware of the benefits of educating the girl child.

• Change in Syllabus to Promote Gender Equality

Urban and rural schools needs to be treated appropriately keeping the cultural variation in mind. Gender sensitisation should become a part of the curriculum. Every subject may adopt a holistic approach where gender sensitivity becomes an integral part of it. At present, all text books commence with the preamble of The Constitution of India, similarly text books/syllabus should include specific laws for protection of women, so that students are equipped with life skills. Syllabus needs to address human trafficking since children are 'at risk' of sexual abuse and trafficking. Students should be taught and explained, according to their capacity to comprehend; the difference between 'good' and 'bad' touch and be encouraged to report any misgiving. Since abuse is not only by adults, but also by older children.

When writing or revising text books, specific attention should be paid to gender/human rights issues especially caste and violence against women, discouraging practices that discriminate against women. While revising text books it is desirable that there should be a joint consultation with the heads of the text book committees and gender/human rights experts including representatives of women and child welfare departments.

• Gender-Friendly Infra-Structure

In every college and university there should be adequate arrangements for girl students and female staff. There should be arrangements for separate wash rooms. Care should be taken that in no way embarrassment is caused to girls and female teachers. Provision should be made for separate rest rooms in schools, in block and district education offices for girls and female staff. In every institutions of higher education there should be an independent complaints committee on sexual harassment.

• Promote Research on Gender Issues

In 1982 the University Grants Commission of India had decided to create Women's Studies Centres in all universities and colleges. The guidelines were reviewed and strengthened in November 2008. The aim of these centres is to encourage and promote research on women's studies and add to the body of existing knowledge. (Source: Government of India, <http://www.ugc.ac.in/>).

• Scholarships

It is desirable that scholarships for financially poor as well as meritorious students should be made available at the beginning of the academic year for girl students. At present some of the States provide scholarships at the end of the year which discourages many girls from admitting themselves in higher education. The facilities available should be made known to all parents. There should be provision for such information to be disbursed at the Panchayat and Municipality level. Institutions of higher education should also make arrangement for dissemination of such information. Provisions for bank loans with low interest rates should be made available for women pursuing higher education in foreign countries.

• Offer Crèche and Childcare Facilities

Early marriage and childbearing increases the workload and responsibilities of women (students and teachers) in universities and institutes. Provision of crèche and childcare facilities has been found useful in many institutions and universities across the world. Availability of crèche and childcare facilities is acknowledged as a positive practice in higher education.

Along with these measures facilities like neighborhood colleges, colleges with girls' hostel etc. should be provided to attract women towards higher education. Open and Distance Learning should be made available in areas with dearth of colleges and universities. Most importantly higher education must enable women to secure desirable jobs and earn economic independence. There should be greater participation of women in technical and science education. Centers of women studies should be nurtured and developed in all universities. There should be more women representation in administrative positions in higher education. Precise gender analysis of the higher education sector is an urgent need.

CONCLUSION

Women in higher education today represent a paradox scenario. While some have access to the best higher education institution of the country providing modern technological facilities others struggle hard to get to the bare minimum. There is high level of disparity across social groups. The urban and rural divide also nurtures disparity. However the picture is not all gloomy. The statistics provided by AISHE 2012 shows that women are ahead of men in many areas of higher education. It has been found that women fair well in the traditional subjects of arts, science and commerce while men are more interested in MBA, MCA, M.Tech. etc.

The need of the hour is a change in the outlook and attitude towards women education at all level. We have to change our thinking, our attitude towards women. Women labour should not be confined within the four walls of her home. Women should be made aware of the educational opportunities that they can avail. Women have feeling, thinking and other mental capabilities as men have. They have all the capacities as that of men and thereby they can do all these as men, if not more. So their power and capacities must be recognized. It is only then women participation in higher education will be enhanced. Higher education needs to be more accessible and employment friendly in order to become meaningful and beneficiary for women.

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