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Introduction

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The Common Sense about Gender Issues in Education

In its most pronounced articulation at the national and international levels, the problem of gender in education has come to be posed in terms of a ‘gender gap’. In this understanding, the term ‘gender gap’ refers predominantly to the *absence* of girls and women from the education system, a situation that then requires interventions by the state in particular to rectify the gender imbalance. Consequently, various state and official bodies have been enjoined through declarations and treaties to take up measures that will bridge the gender gap.¹ Enrolment and attendance at the elementary and higher levels are regarded as key indicators of the efficacy of state intervention in education of girls and women. A great deal of importance is therefore given to the gender parity index (GPI) in education, which is the enrolment ratio of females to males. In particular, the index represents the number of girls for every boy enrolled in the system with a GPI of 1 indicating parity between boys and girls.

Through the large-scale interventions made by the Indian state it is indeed heartening to note that the overall GPI in India has been steadily improving, indicating thereby that there are as many girls as boys in the education system. The GPI for all categories of students for 2011–2012 is 1.01 for primary education (Classes I–V), 0.99 for upper primary levels (Classes VI–VIII) and 0.93 for secondary education (Classes IX–X).² Obviously, the impressive gains obtained

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in terms of more numbers of girls now participating in education need to be consolidated. Instead, the improved GPI has been widely perceived as a sign of the *resolution* of the gender question in education. As a result, the need for any further analysis or understanding of what can be done or should be done in relation to girls' education is in danger of being neglected due to a misplaced sense of having bridged the 'gap' without really achieving the goals of gender equity. It needs reiteration that though access and retention of girls in schools are extremely critical aspects these are only the initial steps in recognising and responding to the gendered nature of the education system, which tends to reproduce existing and exploitative hierarchies of different kinds.

In fact, there is a continued need, perhaps urgency as well, for the examination of a large and complex gamut of issues under the rubric of gender and education in India. In undertaking explorations of these kinds the location of the educational institution, the class, caste and religion of the management, teachers and students would necessarily have to be taken into account, because gender (as has been demonstrated through the rich tradition of feminist scholarship that has developed over the past two decades in India) is not only about girls and boys or about women and men but is inextricably intertwined with other critical markers including region, religion, class, caste, sexual orientation and disability. Such a framing would help develop a comprehensive understanding of the gendered dimensions of education.

There is a need for studies in matters directly related to education such as the curriculum, pedagogic practices, assessment criteria, content of teacher education as also education leadership and management. Equally important is the need to generate studies about the extra-curricular features of life in the education system such as peer group interaction, continuities and discontinuities between home and school/college and the processes of identity formation through the institutional space in which the student spends substantial amounts of time. Such studies would help understand better the differential implications of education for girls and boys.

This special issue is one such attempt towards locating the issues of education and gender relations in their broader sociopolitical context and opening up the formal and non-formal aspects of education to a more critical inquiry.

Feminist Scholarship on Education in India

It has been noted that feminist scholarship in post-Independence India has not engaged as adequately with education as it has with a range of

other subjects such as violence against women, sexuality, women's health, labour or law; areas for which it has provided incisive and insightful analysis.³ In comparative terms this is indeed true and it cannot be denied that education, as a subject of feminist investigation, has not been prioritised. One may speculate about the reasons for this kind of neglect and we may perhaps rightfully conclude that the violence the education system is capable of (in terms of reproducing existing hierarchies and exploitative relationships) is not easily recognised. Education per se, therefore, does not present a problem that requires urgent and immediate attention.⁴

Fortunately though, there have been critical moments in the history of women's studies and the women's movement when education was accorded top priority. Such moments in turn encouraged phases of feminist research and analysis. There is thus a body of feminist analyses and literature on education, by no means insubstantial, which possibly awaits either a consolidation or the forging of a new interpretative frame that can enable an understanding of the significance of earlier work and ensure further research and inquiry. While the introduction to this special issue on gender and education may not be the place to undertake such a task, we only gesture towards what such an undertaking might entail without claiming that it is a comprehensive exercise of the kind that is required.

It is widely acknowledged that in the post-Independence phase the *Towards Equality* report brought an important focus, from a feminist perspective, on issues of education. The realisation that educational opportunities were skewed largely in favour of men and middle class, women and that overall female literacy was very low motivated feminist engagement with education. The ensuing impact of the report was largely at two levels: (i) on the National Policy on Education, 1986, that sought to be more gender sensitive (Government of India, 1986) and (ii) efforts on the ground through the involvement of feminist groups in the work, for example, of Mahila Samakhya. Reflections on the Mahila Samakhya programme are undoubtedly an important feminist resource for understanding the linkages between education and women's empowerment.⁵ The *Towards Equality* report (Government of India, 1974) also laid the foundation for some early studies that either sought to explore the nature of barriers that existed for girls' education or commented on the socialisation processes involved in education or highlighted issues of equality and inequality in education.⁶

Following the publication of *Towards Equality* an interest grew in the 1980s and 1990s to understand the role of colonialism in 'recasting'

women in India. The scholarly attention given to the 19th century reform period in particular has yielded a rich understanding not only of how the dynamics of colonial rule shaped the idea of women's education in India but also the manner in which debates on women's education contributed to the initial phase of nation building.⁷ These studies also drew attention to the formative influence of the 19th century debates on women's education in contemporary times. In addition, critical and reiterative efforts of women's studies scholars have questioned mainstream understanding of the disciplines and of their canonisation in higher education. These critiques of the disciplines were accompanied by self-reflexive efforts made through the 1980s and the 1990s at engendering them.⁸

Even as the attention of most scholars of women's studies was turned towards critiquing the knowledge gaps within disciplines defined by higher educational institutions, the need for an equally serious and urgent engagement with matters regarding elementary education became inescapably evident in the new millennium. The National Curriculum Framework of 2000 as also the accompanying efforts by the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to 'saffronise' school textbooks alerted the larger group of academics across disciplines to the importance of investing critical attention in elementary education. This realisation was further reinforced for feminist scholars when the same regime sought, within the same time span, to also rename 'Women's Studies Centres' as 'Women and Family Studies Centres'. A concerted campaign against such renaming followed and the proposal was dropped.⁹ Such efforts by a right-wing government clarified for feminist scholars that an ideological continuum existed across different levels of education, from elementary to higher education, making it necessary to engage with the entire spectrum of issues within education.

The public discussion around textbooks and the initiative taken by the subsequent government of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) to develop under the aegis of the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) a new National Curriculum Framework (NCF) in 2005 saw the active involvement of many feminist scholars. Not only was the Focus Group paper on Gender (2006) an important feature of NCF 2005, the projects and publications that followed contributed to the understanding of the gendered dimensions of school curricula and textbooks.¹⁰ The renewed focus on gender concerns in schooling also led to the generation of much needed analyses of educational access and attainments by girls belonging to socially marginalised groups.¹¹

If the direct and public interventions made in relation to school curricula served as a wakeup call in the early part of this century, the more recent objective in educational policies has yet again revived feminist interest in education since these policies seek to include girls and women in greater numbers in educational institutions. Feminist critiques of these policies are also now seeking to assess and analyse the content and implications of these interventions by the state.¹²

Responding to Present Developments in Education

The contemporary moment is marked by a range of significant initiatives and developments both in elementary education and higher education. The passing of the Right to Education Act (2009) is a landmark event. Equally significant, is the introduction of the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Rashtriya Madhyamik Siksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and the Rashtriya Uchchattar Siksha Abhiyan (RUSA), which have been given central government funding and direction, taking the state's role in education to new heights. While each of these programmes has a special component for girls' education, schemes meant specifically for girls' education have also been introduced. Among the most significant are the centrally sponsored schemes: the National Programme for Education of Girls at the Elementary Level (NPEGEL) and the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalay (KGBV). These schemes are specially aimed at strengthening girls' education in educationally backward districts.

Notwithstanding these large-scale interventions, the role of the state in education is being radically redefined. Education, which is believed to have been a public good, is being reframed as a quasi-public or private good for consumption like other goods.¹³ Earlier taken-for-granted notions regarding the centrality of the state as the provider of education, especially at the school level and also in higher education, are being challenged. Private entrepreneurship, the corporate sector, as well as large-scale non-government foundations have emerged as new players in the educational space. Educational policy is being redefined through relentless lobbying by new interests that champion the role of private parties and also question both the need for and the capacity of state institutions in the realm of school and teacher education.

While many of these 'educational reforms' are aimed at bringing greater accountability in the system and to increase employability of the 'products' of the system, the available evidence does not necessarily sustain these claims. Nor do we see a systematic effort to examine the

implications of educational reforms for gender equality. For example, the common assumption that education will necessarily lead to greater participation of women in the labour force is not supported by evidence available in the large data sets generated by the government itself. Rekha Pappu's paper 'Towards a Framework for Forging Links: Exploring the Connections between Women's Education, Empowerment and Employment' engages precisely with this issue. The paper locates the question of how *education* can respond to the problem of women's withdrawal from the labour force in the context of the growing disconnect in the Indian context between women's education and employment, on the one hand, and the lack of gendered responses from the education system to the problem of unemployment, on the other.

Undoubtedly, the changing dynamic between the state and the market is an important feature of education today. Often, and in the public domain in particular, reflections on these aspects are articulated in terms of the *quality* of education. The notion of quality, in turn, determines the assessment of public (or government) and private schools. While there is much to be said about the discussions, the relevant point here is that gender concerns are absent in the efforts at defining quality. The insights provided by two papers in the present issue make important contributions to this larger discussion of the public and private provisioning of education.

Nirmali Goswami's paper 'Costs, Security and Discipline: Gendering the Debate on School Choice in India' seeks an understanding through a study of a village populated by multi-ethnic groups in Assam of how decisions regarding the choice of schools for girls are made by parents. Her findings challenge the conventional understanding of quality as being mainly about infrastructure or medium of instruction or educational attainments and instead posit the salience of gender in matters of school choice.

Other papers on schooling processes also extend the understanding that educational processes operate beyond the formal institutional domain and stress the need to foreground the linkages between different learning sites. Sangeeta Roy's paper 'Why Should Holidays Come in the Way of School?: Understanding Girls' Experiences of Schooling' draws on a study of the experiences of girl students in a village in the Telangana state. The paper highlights the continuities and discontinuities that exist for girls between home and school. The girls' perceptions of these experiences also shape their understanding of the school. Here too the different responses of the home, the community and the school to issues of discipline, autonomy and sexuality shape the nature of the girls'

engagement with the school space, at times overriding issues of what they learn at school.

Goswami and Roy's papers thus highlight the importance of gendered discourses at the level of the family in examining the process of schooling and how children, parents and teachers negotiate with the same. The paper titled, 'Maternal Involvement in Everyday Schooling: A Micro Study' by Gayatri Panda, with its focus on the role of mothering in children's schooling extends the understanding of this conjuncture involving the home and the school. Drawing on a Bernsteinian framework of mothering and its role in social reproduction through education, Panda presents the differently nuanced engagement of mothers from varied sociocultural and economic backgrounds with their children's schooling process through a study conducted in a village in Odisha.

An examination of educational experiences away from the familial space and governed by institutional concerns of discipline and security forms the theme of the paper by Zeba Imam and Shadab Bano. Their paper titled, 'Patriarchy, Community Rights and Institutions for Education: Counter-discourse and Negotiation for Rights', analyses the situation within an institutional space that is widely regarded as the bastion of modern education for Muslims. Their paper focuses on the perspective of Muslim women students who find problematic the extreme protectionist attitude of the institute towards them. The paper highlights how the women students negotiate and strategise within the framework of femininity and cultural rights that is available to them.

While Zeba Imam and Shadab Bano's paper focuses on the space outside the classroom of a higher educational institute, which impacts both the learning opportunities available to the students as well as their development as autonomous individuals, Deepa Sreenivas' article is a reflection on pedagogic approaches adopted in two different kinds of classrooms within the university space. Sreenivas' article titled 'Between Politics and Discipline: Gender Studies in Institutional Contexts' draws attention to the challenges involved in teaching gender studies in the undergraduate space, a space that is new to teachers of women's studies/gender studies. Through her reflexive account, she raises issues regarding selection of texts as well as of pedagogic strategies for two different sets of students.

Aswathy Raveendran and Sugra Chunawala's article 'Reproducing Values: A Feminist Critique of a Higher Secondary Biology Textbook Chapter on Reproductive Health' critiques the masculinist projection of science as an objective, positivist, and value-neutral discourse. Prior to the consideration of the pedagogic dimension, their paper analyses the

NCF 2005 and the NCERT textbook to review the dominant ideologies prevalent in science concerning reproductive health and fertility of women. Challenging entrenched notions of how science should be taught, the paper makes a case for problematising the fact-value distinction that is privileged by mainstream science educators. Both, Sreenivas' and Raveendran and Chunawala's papers raise important questions, albeit at different levels of education, about selection, representation of what constitutes valued knowledge and the challenges faced in adopting a more engaged pedagogic strategy.

The articles included in this issue are drawn from presentations that were made at the subtheme session on 'Education, knowledge and institutional spaces', which was a part of the XIV National Conference on Women's Studies held at Guwahati in February 2014. The overarching theme of the conference was 'Equality, pluralism and the state: Perspectives from the women's movement'. These papers have responded only to a segment of gendered concerns that have emerged from the field of education. Undoubtedly, there are many more that still need attention.

Sexual harassment in educational institutes, for instance, is a very critical matter that affects the education of large sections of girls. This issue is closely linked to the issues of male and female sexuality, touching on both sexual desire and sexual orientation. It is important to differentiate between and engage with both aspects: sexual harassment and sexuality. In fact, the sub-theme session on 'Education, knowledge and institutional spaces' at the Guwahati conference did include a panel discussion on sexual harassment.¹⁴ The session attracted a large number of participants who responded to the presentations and joined the discussion by raising an array of issues thereby highlighting the complexities involved in the issue. However, it has not been possible for us to include the papers on this topic here.

There are similarly many other areas that need further exploration, one of them being the difference between the promise that modern educational institutions offer to women and the manner in which they deliver on these promises, especially to women from different socio-cultural backgrounds. It is thus imperative to engage critically with the various formulations about women's education, understand their implications and extend them in directions that ensure equity, pluralism and substantive justice for marginal groups in particular.

Notes

1. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provides a significant example of such an approach in the present time. While the aim of the second

- MDG is to ensure primary education for boys and girls, the third goal is explicitly concerned with the education of girls when it specifies: 'eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education not later than 2015'.
2. For significant critiques from a feminist perspective on gender parity index, see Ramachandran (2009) and John (2012).
 3. See, for instance, the introduction in John (2008) or the editorial in the special issue on gender of *Contemporary Education Dialogue* (Manjrekar and Saxena, 2012).
 4. Other explanations too have been provided for this relative neglect by women's studies of the field of education. John (2008) suggests that the subject of education was largely ignored by the women's movement and women's studies because it was not seen as a site for radical change.
 5. See in particular Ghose (2002) and Ramachandran and Jandhyala (2012).
 6. From among some of the significant studies that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s reference may be made to Bhattacharjee (1991), Chanana (1990, 1993), Karlekar (1983, 1989) and Wazir (2000) to cite a few.
 7. This area has benefited from the analysis of a large number of scholars. To name just a few, they include Chakravarty (1998), Minault (1998), Sarkar and Sarkar (2007) and Swaminathan (1999).
 8. The seminar conducted in 2001 by the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), Delhi on 'Engendering Disciplines, Disciplining Gender' (see John, Jassal and Raman, 2001) represents one such effort. John (2008) too brings together works that provide an insight into such engendering processes.
 9. These developments have been discussed in Manjrekar (2003) and John (2008).
 10. Bhog and Ghose (2014) and Bhog et al. (2010) provide examples of this kind of feminist engagement with textbook analysis and textbook writing, respectively.
 11. See Velaskar (1990), Nambissan (2000) and Hasan and Menon (2004). Rege's work (2010) is an important example of the efforts made to transform pedagogic practices from a feminist perspective that was deeply informed by the philosophy of Phule and Ambedkar. These interventions were necessitated by the realisation that in the post-Mandal period the profile of the student population had changed to include larger numbers of students from Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Caste (OBC) backgrounds.
 12. See Ramachandran (2004, 2009) as also Kumar and Gupta (2008) and Saxena et al. (2010).
 13. Tilak (1993) discusses education as a public good and higher education as a quasi-public good in his discussion on issues to do with financing education.
 14. The panelists included Kumkum Roy (JNU, Delhi); Madhumeeta Sinha (English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad); Madhumita

Purkayastha and Champa Rao (Dibrugarh and Doomdooma colleges, Assam); Mary John (Centre for Women's Development Studies, Delhi) and Paromita Chakravarti and Sreerupa Sengupta (Jadavpur University, Kolkata).

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