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Globalization, Higher Education and the Changing Status of Indian Women- An Appraisal of the Emerging Issues and Challenges

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Globalization has brought in a number of changes in the world today changing it into a global market. The direct nexus between the industry, corporate world and higher education has brought a transformation in the skills required for various jobs. Natural and Pure Sciences are not considered supreme anymore. Applied Sciences and professional skills are much more in demand now. The new developments have led to the de-evaluation of the subjects in the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences. Women used to take admission in the Colleges in General Education, Arts or in Humanities in the early 1990's. The trend is very much different now. Feminist perspectives on women’s educational qualifications have expressed their concern on their under participation, underachievement and under-representation. This paper deals with the appraisal of the changes in choice of subjects available to them and the reasons for this change. The impact of social, cultural and economic disparities across various states in India on the enrollment of women varies from state to state. For this, a focused vision is required which will reach out to more women by encompassing the issues of access to and equity with respect to education of women in the higher education sector.

Keywords: Globalization, Gender-sensitive, privatization, enrollment, higher education, database, disparities.

INTRODUCTION

The process of globalization has transformed world trade, communications, educational activities and economic relations since the latter part of 20th century. Student’s option for higher education is no longer constrained by national boundaries. For the first time in history in the era of globalization, world’s student population truly have access to a ‘global market place’ of higher education. With the dramatic rise of a new Indian middle class and increased wealth of the Indian upper class, the number of students who are able to pursue education in other countries has really increased. It has led to very rapid integration of countries across the globe in terms of commodities as well as finance.

There is a direct nexus between the industry, corporate world and higher education, which has brought a transformation in the skills needed for jobs. There has been a corresponding change in the boundaries between Arts and Science subjects. Pure Sciences are relegated to a lower position than are the Applied Sciences and professional skills. In the hierarchy of disciplines, new disciplines such as Management, Media and Mass Communication, Fashion Technology have also risen up the ladder. Women used to take admission in General Education or in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences till the early 1990’s—a trend which is still continuing. However, they are also entering the professional subjects offered in the public and private institutions in the traditionally labelled ‘masculine disciplines’. The impact of these changes requires attention if the goal of social change and gender equity has to be achieved.

Feminist sociological perspectives on women’s educational experience have highlighted several dimensions like their under participation, under achievement and under representation; sex role socialization and stereotyping of the feminine role and its impact upon the girl’s education. The segregation of girls into streams of Arts and Humanities and boys into Science at the school level is well known. Sociologists were of the opinion that this imbalance in subjects had to be redressed to remove inequality. In India, the decision to make Science compulsory up to 10th class ensured that all girls will also study Science. Much has been
written on the patriarchal imprint on the subject choices of women in higher education and on the feminine and masculine dichotomy of subjects.

Changing Context

There are several dimensions of changes that have taken place since 1991, the most important being the entry of private institutions, the increase in the individual cost of higher education, the entry of foreign institutions, the large number of Indian students who go abroad on self-financing basis, change in academic environment of higher educational institutions. There is a perceptible change in the choices of women especially in the metropolitan cities where they are enrolling in the new ‘professional’ courses such as Fashion Designing, Computers, Human Resource Management etc.

This paper seeks to find out the latest trends in the enrollment of women in different faculties and subjects. In addition, the data on the marginal groups such as the dalits and adivasi students is also analyzed. Women from these groups suffer the multiple handicaps of gender, tribe. The regional disparities are also as crucial as those of general population and the marginal groups.

Access and Equality

Policy Framework:

Higher education was entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the constitutional provisions for positive discrimination. The commitment to broaden the student base was reflected in the financial incentives provided to dalit and adivasi students. Higher education has occupied a dominant position in independent India since it was perceived as a promoter of economic growth, technological development and a tool of equal opportunity and upward social mobility. This helped in giving importance to social justice around the issues of caste, tribe, class and gender. There has been a careful articulation of education for equality for women which is reflected in the educational policy in post independence India. Since 1991, the policies of government have dramatically changed the otherwise privileged position of higher education. The govt. began to talk of setting aside public support to higher education and to make it self-financing while privatizing it. Higher education has also become a non merit good. Private institutions have been permitted to be set up on a liberal scale without a clearly defined policy to regulate them (Anandkrishnan, 2004). The link of universities with private sector is not new in India nor is the nexus between the higher education and economy. What is disheartening is the nature and the speed of change, the motives of those who are establishing the private institutions, the lack of response from the Indian government. It is sad to note that though India’s population is above 100 crores, its access to Higher Education is still about 6% as compared to 88% in U.S.A, 52% in U.K, 19% in Thailand and 11% in Indonesia.

Women in Higher Education

This section of the paper deals with the data on enrollment of women and men in higher education, of women across faculties/disciplines or subjects and their presence across various levels. It also lays emphasis on the difference in their enrollment in general and professional education. Starting from 1950-51 when the proportion of women was 10.9 percent to 40.04 percent in 2002-03, the increase has been significant. In other words, there were 14 women per 100 men in 1950-51 which increased to 67 in 2002-03. Thus the proportion of women entering higher education has increased rapidly from 16,85,926 (32%) in 1991-92 to 40 % (36,95,964) of all students in 2002-03. There have been also shifts in women’s choice of disciplines in higher education. There are also wide disparities in enrollment by region, caste, tribe and by gender. The differences have an impact on women from the disadvantaged groups.

Enrollment in general and Professional Education

The programmes in higher education are divided into those of general subjects such as Arts which include Social Sciences and Humanities; Pure Sciences, Professional courses such as Engineering, Medical science, teacher education, agriculture, law etc. They are also divided into masculine and feminine disciplines. Arts, Social sciences, Humanities, Teacher Education have been viewed as feminine disciplines. On the other hand, Commerce, Law, Engineering are masculine subjects. Medical science has not been a masculine discipline in India unlike in the western countries. In India like in the rest of South Asia, the practice of female seclusion enjoined the treatment of women patients by women doctors. This required training women doctors, thereby enabling them to enter the medical profession (Chanana, 1988). The proportion of women in some of the masculine disciplines was very less soon after independence and remained so till the 1980’s with the exception of Commerce. Science, a masculine discipline provides an interesting insight on disciplinary choices of young men and women. The proportion of men in Science subjects was 80-90% in 1980-81 which has come down to 59.8% in 2002-03. The differential importance of general science for women and men over time has to be understood as a background to shifts in disciplinary choices in the recent past. The proportion of women in Science decreased from 33.3 percent in
10950-51 to 28.8% in 1980-81. Science has never been the first preference for young women whose parents considered marriage much more important than higher education. A Science degree required a longer investment of time and other resources and thus was not desirable. Prior to 1990's, education and its linkage to the job market early on in life was only for those men who needed jobs and was certainly not for women. These days young women and men like to earn as soon as they can, even while in school. The revolution in values cuts across upper and middle strata, who want to begin earning as soon as possible. The daughters of city based professional parents, especially if they do not have brothers, have really undergone a great change. The parents are giving the best education to their daughters and expect them to be independent and follow careers. In this changed scenario, the priorities of women have also changed. They too want professional education and are therefore entering into masculine disciplines. The two simultaneous trends of clustering/concentration and dispersal can be seen in the enrollment of men and women in higher education. During the first three decades, while women tended to be clustered in the general disciplines of arts and sciences (nearly 90%), men's participation was characterized by both clustering in arts and sciences disciplines but also significantly dispersed in others such as Commerce, engineering/technical and Law. Lately, the women's participation too is marked by clustering as well as dispersal. Once women enter higher education at the undergraduate level, their chances of going up to the next level increases. This may also have to do with the master's programme in management, computers and IT, media, advertising, fashion technology etc. which are popular in the metropolitan cities.

Regional Disparities

The gendered impact of social, cultural and economic disparities across states has been referred to time and again by the official Committees and Commissions as well as by the social scientists. These trends are continuing while the enrollment of women varies from province to province. Kerala has had the highest enrollment and even now it is 60 percent. Thus, there are more women than men in higher education. The other states where they are more than half the proportion are Goa (58.5), Punjab (52.68), Andaman and Nicobar Islands (57.77), Chandigarh (55.5) and Pondicherry (52.6). Those with lower proportion are also the most backward namely Bihar (23.81), Jharkhand (30.40), Chhattisgarh (36.70), Rajasthan (32.33), Uttar Pradesh (38.40) and Madhya Pradesh (37.20). In these provinces, the proportion is less than the all India average of 40.05 percent. The link between the state and professional education is very close. The variations can be seen in the growth of engineering and technology courses in the four southern states. A majority of women students were from the southern and western regions. The number of women students is highest in the states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. The regional disparities are due to several reasons. One of them is the early starting of formal education in the southern as compared to the northern regions during the colonial period. Many private engineering colleges have been established there. The socio-cultural practices and positive attitudes of parents towards the higher education of their daughters also has an impact on the women's access to professional education. This difference is to a large extent due to the practice of female seclusion in the north and its absence in the south (Chanana, 1988).

Caste, Class, Gender and Region

It is a known fact that inspite of a very well formulated policy of positive discrimination, the representation of dalit and adivasi students is not adequate and the proportion of women from among them is negligible. They generally join general education courses and are denied access to elite courses and institutions. In 2001-02, the proportions of SC/ST students were much less as compared to students of general categories. There were 824 SC women and 344 ST women, i.e. 4.3 percent and 1.8 percent respectively of all women research students. They are also better represented in states in which women have better representation and in which higher education facilities have expanded in recent years.

Gender, Subject Choices and Career Aspirations

The relationship between availability of disciplinary choices and women's ability to access them are not directly related nor are they dependent on women's academic achievement. In India, girl's academic performance is generally better or at par with the boys when they finish school. Every year, newspaper headlines highlight the better performance of girls at the school board examinations in different states. Yet when they pursue higher studies, it is not necessarily the subject of their choice. The fact is that a large majority of women may be deprived of exercising free options at the school like being discouraged by family to take up science subjects or not being sent to expensive private good quality schools. After schooling, they may not be provided the financial investment in coaching /tuition for entrance tests as they are expensive and women are not socially to work and earn before marriage.

Discipline boundaries not only limit choices, they are also dependent on the future options of life chances of women. Education still in women an investment to fall back upon in case of the daughter becoming a widow or
being deserted. Social role expectations affect the aspirations of women in other ways too. For example, in the patriarchal social structure, parents are not expected to use the income of their daughters. Therefore, even educated daughters are not encouraged to work and if they do so, it is for a short period before marriage. It is the right of the groom’s family to decide whether she will work or not.

The poor parents have another problem even though they perceive the significance of education. They expect and need immediate returns from education-something which is possible through professional degrees. General education, although inexpensive, does not assure a job. So general education is useless and professional education is unaffordable. There is a lack of role models and socialization support at home. Women from these social categories are most affected by the stratification of disciplines, programmes and institutions. For a majority of young women in the academia, higher education is not linked to careers. This is the reason why women, even from well off homes, join arts, humanities because they are cheaper, softer and shorter than the professional subjects is growing. In fact, the trends, identified in 2001, of moving away from the general courses to the professional courses which lead to jobs and careers are being reinforced. The period of post 1991 phase set forth a change which increased the social demand for a specific kind of professional education, especially skill-oriented undergraduate degrees which lead to a career and a job. Earlier an undergraduate degree, except in engineering and medicine, was a step to further higher education and was not a finishing degree. It was like an investment in their social status as well as an additional criterion for marriage.

Parental expectations and social role expectations have undergone a great change since mid 1990’s. More women are enrolling in engineering and law but the preference for management degrees and computer related degrees and skills is higher. These subjects are available in the fast expanding private sector which responds quickly to the unmet demand for specific skills. Informal discussions with key persons reveal that computer applications and software computer engineering as compared to other specializations are popular among women. In the last few years, women have become visible in the call centres, telemarketing, front desk jobs in the multinational/ private banks, hospitals, hotels etc. Most of these jobs are short term and contractual and suit the social role expectations of women. It is also anticipated that the public and private institutions which offer contractual, low paid, short term jobs may have in the long run, substantial number of women faculty leading to the feminization of teaching in the private higher education (Chanana, 2003).

A study of women scientists in biological sciences in the central universities and national laboratories also concludes that there are few permanent women faculty members compared to those who obtain research degrees. More women than men are holding junior faculty positions. There are fewer women students in the elite institutions such as IIT’s, and regional colleges of engineering. Modern education and skills seem to reinforce tradition for majority of women students. The new disciplines which are offered in the public and private sectors of higher education seem to meet the aspirations of only a minority of young women and their parents in the metropolitan cities to be professionally qualified, to have a career, to earn to be independent. In their case, gender and class overlap in overcoming the traditional barriers to women’s education.

CONCLUSION

Higher education was almost free during the first four decades since it was publicly funded, but women have not achieved an equal access. It has also been denied to or made almost impossible for the women from disadvantaged groups to gain entry because of social and economic reasons. There is a need to deconstruct the inequitable impact of globalization. Pure Sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities, the disciplines preferred by women remain confined to the public institutions. Though women are doing professional courses, many of them are not even working especially after marriage. It is important to create a broad-based database on higher education which is gender sensitive. Information about students namely about their enrollment, discipline they have joined, discipline, specialization and institution are imperative for understanding of any system. Research on higher education deserves support so that a quantitative database can be supported by qualitative inputs. It would help in making plans for the future course of action and the research policy.

Globalization should be viewed as an opportunity and a challenge. Competitive forces in the long run will churn the market and only those institutions will survive and excel whose fundamentals will be good. These will ensure quality to the aspiring students. It is high time that the govt. evolved a framework on the role and function of higher education, public and private. The procedures have to be simplified, permit regime to be abolished and transparency and accountability for quality assurance in Higher education to be introduced. This needs a visionary leader who would encompass the issues of access and equity with a focus on the education of girls and women.

REFERENCES


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