Indian Education Policies Under The Lens of Postmodern Feminism

Critical Pedagogy for Addressing the Gender-Related Blind Spots in Contemporary India Education System

Akanksha Jain[1], Ajeeta Srivastava[2]

[1]Having completed her post-graduation from the University of Delhi in Political Science Honors, the author being a great enthusiast of the field of education policy and gender, has been closely associated with the ed-tech initiative of the NGO - Sri Aurobindo Society, LEAD School, and other organisations - in their novel initiative of innovating education in India through inexpensive learning. The author is Co-Founder Director 'Bidoshala', a startup based on experiential learning pedagogy. The author hails from Delhi.

[2]The author is a Ph.D. Research Scholar at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, a central government university of the Government of India. Having completed her Economics Honours from the University of Delhi, the author has been closely associated with organisations like Steel Authority of India, Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd., Consortium of Women Entrepreneurs in India, in various roles exploring their gender-targeted welfare initiatives. The author has a great interest in gender and development, and has been closely associated with the ed-tech initiativesaimed at developing a sound socio-economic environment. The author belongs to Lucknow.

ABSTRACT

Education, across the world, has been observed to be a powerful tool for the emancipation of the marginalized sections of any society. In the Indian scenario, it has been all the more relevant as there is substantial proof of how education has helped the lesser privileged in improving their lives. Women are one such social group in India who have shown a remarkable improvement in their quality of life by utilising the opportunities they have received. However, there still exist serious gaps in the education policy structure in India in the context of gender sensitivity in terms of the pedagogy and overall approach adopted in planning for education of the masses. Blind spots related to gender pose a serious obstacle in the achievement of the objective of empowerment of women through education. The current paper adopts a postmodern approach with an attempt to explore the applicability of critical pedagogy as a tool to address these blind spots in the Indian education policy. This paper concludes by exploring the possibility of incorporating gender sensitivity in the Indian education system through critical pedagogy in order to empower women through education.

*Keywords***: Postmodern feminism, Critical Pedagogy, Education Policy, Gender sensitivity, Marginalised communities.**

INTRODUCTION

"Awake, Arise and Educate. Smash Traditions - Liberate!" - Savitribai Phule (Indian social reformer and educationist). Savitribai Phule, known as the mother of Indian feminism, gave a vision to the Indian educationists about the magnanimous potential that education holds as a tool for empowerment of the oppressed and the marginalized. Women in India have been one such category. A considerable number of women in India, even in the present day, are deprived of their basic human rights and protections of citizenship. A major cause behind their condition is often recognised as the lack of economic opportunities they face due to the inadequate education they receive. According to the United Nations Foundation, '(W)hen you invest in a girl, she contributes to economic growth when she becomes a woman' (UN data on girl child education). According to UN records, every year of schooling increases a girls' individual earning power by 10 to 20 percent, while the return on secondary education is even higher, in the 15 to 25 percent range.

Indian education policies have worked towards the upliftment of women through education adopting a welfare approach. National policies on education have been focused upon gender equality since independence. However, the authors believe that gender sensitivity is a better solution to the challenges faced by Indian women but it has not received the recognition it deserves. The present paper makes an attempt to explore the popular theories of postmodern

feminism in the Indian context in order to identify the issues, challenges, and blind spots concerning women that exist in the Indian education policies. The authors propose the possibility of establishing an education policy framework based on the foundation of critical pedagogy in order to encourage not just women, but also policymakers and executors in the field of education, to probe the contemporary developments related to education amongst females.

POSTMODERNFEMINISM

This section contains a brief on postmodern feminism in order to develop an understanding of the concept in the context of India and its relevance to the state of women's education in the country.

● **General Theory of Postmodern Feminism**

The postmodern feminist epistemology "... is a synthesis of postmodernism and feminist theory" (TISS, Gender and Social Work, M.11). This branch of feminism critiques the masculine representation and understanding of popular concepts, ideas, arguments and meanings. Postmodern feminism denies the 'one shoe fits all' approach when it comes to women's oppression and methods of their liberation. Differences and individuality form the very core of the postmodern feminist thought which is supported by ideas of "... multiplicity and plurality" (Ibid). Helen Cixous, one of the most prominent thinkers of postmodern feminism theory focuses on this idea of 'difference'. One of the early thinkers in post-structural feminism, Helen Cixous is best known for her work 'The Laugh of the Medusa' – an article that focusses on liberation of women through writing. Luce Irigaray, the Belgian born French feminist who investigated the use and misuse of language in relation to women, worked towards a similar aim with the intent of liberating feminine philosophy from masculine philosophies. Irigaray's focus was on gender neutrality; however, the challenges highlighted by feminists in the contemporary world demand a wider outlook like gender sensitivity. All in all, the whole idea of postmodern feminism is best summarised in the words of Sands and Nuccio (1992) who talk about celebrating the differences "... while promoting unity and action on women's issues (Latting, 1995, p.831)."

● **Postmodern Feminism in The Indian Context**

Julia Kristeva, the Bulgarian-French feminist philosopher who recognised the distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic, had rejected the established norms of associating 'feminine' with female and 'masculine' with male. Her theory can be applied in the Indian scenario when talking about gender roles and its perceptions of the society. The writings of Rosemarie Tong highlight a similar theme in the context of Third World women, which is particularly applicable in case of Indian women whose oppression stems from political and economic disparities in the society. Limited choice in terms of profession as determined by the individual's gender in India often poses hurdles restricting one from achieving their full potential. This is true for both males and females in Indian society. This sort of categorical perception is criticised by the postmodern feminists. The contemporary Indian feminist, Barnita Bagchi, captures this very essence in her writings when she says, that, "...developmentandsocial change can take place only when the paradigms of education and development formulated by policymakers and educational experts fruitfully cross-fertilise with the aspirations of education, development, andsubjectivity of the people whose lives are sought to be improved" (Bagchi, 2003, p.3).

● **Education And Postmodern Feminism**

As stated above, women in India have been recognised by successive governments as a social section that has not been able to achieve its full potential due to a range of limiting factors in the form of socio-cultural, economic and political challenges. Though education has been used as a tool of social change for Indian women, the current education system in India faces certain gender related gaps which when observed under the lenses of postmodern feminism can be better resolved. The question arises with regard to the efficiency of the already existing tools and methods working in this direction.

The adoption of the overarching idea of gender neutrality in policies related to education can be seen as a major cause of low literacy rates among Indian women; the disorientation faced by them due to the disconnect between the education received by them and their lived experiences; and their unsatisfactory presence in educational institutes. The high dropout rate of females at school level, their low presence in institutions of higher education and substandard presence and performance in professional courses has been pointed out here. As per Census of India Report, 2011, the literacy rate for females and males are 64.63% and 80.9% respectively. As per All India Higher Education Survey (AIHES) 2017-18, while 49 per cent female students are enrolled in B.SC, this figure is as low as 29 per cent for B.Tech., a proof of lower female representation in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).

"The difficulty with many current theories is that they remain laden with masculinist assumptions about hierarchies and justifications for neglecting contradictions and unknowability" (Wallin, 1999, p.4). Policy development for educational institutions within the framework of postmodern feminism might be effective in eradicating gender related gaps when objectives of equality and justice are targeted. These gaps need to be recognised in the context of the Indian education system and the causes behind them need to be identified. The authors make an attempt to do the same in the following section.

WOMEN AND THE INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

The universally accepted aims of education are to enable an individual to explore who they are, to be able to make connections with people around them, gain self-confidence, ensure the well-being of the self and the society, and, worthy of gaining and capable of giving social support.

● **Blind Spots**

There exists a significant lack of knowledge and awareness with regard to the realities of Indian women and their distinctive needs which often result in gender imbalances in various public spaces. With the idea of identity getting associated with the individual, both feminist scholars and other thinkers have recognised the issue of established gender roles where traditionally women are expected to have an inclination towards domesticity. A possible connection of this ideology can be made with the type of training they receive in educational institutions and the choices they have in terms of profession on the basis of their education. Women's conception of themselves and their corresponding educational requirements, both in the private sphere as well as the public sphere, can be a dominant deciding factor with regard to their unique life goals. In the dynamic Indian society, we are witnessing a transitional phase in the context of women and the work-life balance expected to be maintained by them. Though a work-life balance is expected to be maintained by both the male and female members of the society, women bear the burden of making peace with the constant turmoil that they face between the traditionally entrenched gender roles and the modern ideas of equality and freedom that they are exposed to via social media, online spaces, popular dialogue, national and international exposure, and discourses in academia. Sex-stereotyping through particular types of syllabi, textbooks, teaching materials and expected learning outcomes thus proves to be a stumbling block that constantly reinforces gendered identities.

Though legislation is in place in India to provide wholesome education to both boys and girls alike, barriers beyond legislation exist as a glaring gap in the implementation of education related policies. Thus, it becomes important to observe the various stages of policy making in the field of education within the ambit of gender.

● **Male Hegemony in Policy Making**

In principle, any policy making initiative in a democratic setup should have equal participation of all the stakeholders in terms of their opinions and suggestions. Such a practice has been observed in the Indian legal and economic scenario, for example the Justice Verma Committee invited people's opinion while drafting the laws dealing with criminals accused of rape. On December 23, 2012 a three-member Committee headed by Justice J.S. Verma, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, was constituted to recommend amendments to the Criminal Law so as to provide for quicker trial and enhanced punishment for criminals accused of committing sexual assault against women. The other members on the Committee were Justice Leila Seth, former judge of the High Court and Gopal Subramanium, former Solicitor General of India. (PRS Legislative Research). Another latest example is that of the Farmer's Bill for which the Government of India has invited suggestions to resolve the issues raised by people protesting against it. However, in the field of education such an observation has not been made. In the case of committees on education in India, it can be noted that there has been an underrepresentation of women as members. The missing voices of women who should have been an active participant of such processes might be perceived as a void in the policy formulation. Article 15(3) of the Constitution of India empowers the state to make any special provisions for women and children. A positive implication of the same at the policy formulation level in the field of education has rarely been witnessed. A brief analysis of the major education policies in India provides a clearer picture.

In post-independence India, a need was felt for a national system of education appropriately designed as per the aspirations of a free and progressive India. The target of expansion of educational facilities along with a fundamental transformation of society was aimed at. The Indian Constitution lays down the foundations for various contours of the educational plan of action in the form of provisions in the Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy. For example: Article 45 ensuring free and compulsory education; Articles 29 & 30 providing for education amongst minorities; specific instructions for education in the mother tongue at the primary stage; and many other such provisions. Planning in education entered its most active phase when the Five-Year Plans started getting implemented in India. The First Five Year Plan (1951-56) saw efforts on the part of the State towards "...re-organisation of the educational system and integration of its different stages and branches..."(Ray, 2013, p.161). In the consecutive Five-Year Plans, primary education, girl's education, teachers' training, and other domains of educational planning started getting recognition.

One of the most notable committees on education in India was the Kothari Commission of 1964-66 which took on itself the task of advising the then Government on the existing social and economic problems associated with the Indian education system and the need to address them at all stages from primary to post graduate level. The National Policy on Education (NPE), 1968, which was formulated on the advice of the Kothari Commission emphasised on "(G)irls' education and education for physically challenged students were emphasized to bring social transformation (Thakur &Kumar,2021, p.14)." Being the first educational policy in free India, the NPE 1968 focussed on the equalisation of educational opportunity, however, when we consider the literacy rate among women, we see an inadequate growth. The

female literacy rate as per the 1971 Census was 21.97% which increased to only 29.76% in 1981. The 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act led to the National Policy on Education, 1986 (As modified in 1992). Though it focussed on women's empowerment and adult literacy as an important objective, it could not give satisfactory results in terms of adult literacy rate by sex and place of residence (for both rural and urban areas) that was 78.8% in males and only 59.3% in females as per the Census of 2011. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (The Education for All Movement), 2000-2001, which aimed at dissemination of primary education, sought to develop an education system which could cater to contemporary societal needs like equity based on gender. "Longer term trends suggest that female labour force participation rates in India have been puzzling.

Female participation rates declined from 34.1 per cent in 1999-00 to 27.2 percent in 2011-12, and wide gender differences in participation rate also persists (Verick, 2011, p.1)." As discussed previously, Indian society has been witnessing constant changes through the years with the public and private roles that need to be played by women evolving. Maintaining a work-life balance by women has emerged as an important necessity in the present times, both in terms of their productivity as well as their individual identity, and for this the educational policies in India do not seem to have done much. The Right to Education Act (RTE) that came into existence on 1st April 2010, guaranteed the Fundamental Right to Education to all Indian children aged 6 to 14 years. However, one of the major hurdles at the level of implementation of the RTE is the basic characteristic of the program- gender neutrality. The special provisions that are required in the present-day scenario in India for the encouragement of female education were not considered.

The National Policy on Education (NPE), 2020 inspired from the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals has adopted a refreshingly unique approach towards education policy making with the committee taking into consideration the views of the various stakeholders at all levels of governance, however, even in this committee female membership has been limited. Only 23% of the prominent personalities involved in the drafting of NPE 2020 were females with a majority being of male members. It has been observed that any policy, including education policies, reflects the outlook of those who are in power while formulating a particular policy. This has especially had a close connection with the objectives and strategies of education-related policies being implemented at any point of time.

Shaping of the educational system of a country should take into consideration the inequalities existing in India along with the ideas of cultural diversity deeply rooted in Indian society. The next section suggests the possibility of critical pedagogy as a tool that might be effective in shaping the empowered identity of individuals, especially women through education making them capable of addressing the above-mentioned inequalities themselves.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AS A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

At the level of theorising about education for women and its relationship to their political, social and economic realities, the problem of inequality in practice points to the complexities of combining educational training they receive with the everyday experiences they have in life. (Arnot, 1982, p.65). Within the hierarchical structure of Indian society, the dialectics of gender struggle demand a liberating non-conservative ideology. This thought when applied in the field of education should ensure a broader vision and critical understanding of "...education as a force for strengthening the imagination and expanding democratic public life (Giroux, 2010, p.715)."

● **Efforts Towards Revisiting Gender Specific Pedagogy in India**
At the international level, India has seen a number of organisations working effectively to address the gender gap in education. Some of these organisations are UNICEF, Room to Read, British Council, UNESCO, Education Development Trust, UN, CARE International, Oxfam, World Bank, etc. These organisations try to achieve local success with worldwide expertise. These bodies combine their on-the-ground insight with international best practice to improve education systems and transform lives around the world. The basic belief behind the efforts of these organisations is that education builds capacity of communities to ensure empowerment for marginalised women and girls, enabling them to make informed and holistic interventions in health, livelihood, education and disaster relief & resilience, and provide innovative solutions to deep-rooted development problems. Many of these organisations also dedicate a considerable number of resources towards strengthening already existing legislation in India, such as the Right to Education (RTE), and encouraging education amongst females. Such efforts are also made by several Indian organisations like Iimpact, Educate Girls, Nanhi Kali, Sakhi, etc. Very often, the Indian organisations working in this field, focus on the primary education of non-school going girls. We aim to achieve behavioural, social and economic transformation for all girls towards an India where all children have equal opportunities to access quality education. Further, they leverage existing community and government resources to ensure that all girls are in school and learning well. Their ultimate aim is to achieve behavioural, social and economic transformation for all girls towards an India where all children have equal opportunities to access quality education.

Such transformation essentially stems from breaking the shackles of pre-existing notions. Critical pedagogy as advocated by Ira Shor and Paulo Freire can be an effective tool to do the same as it is a teaching approach which attempts to help students question and challenge domination, and the beliefs and practices that dominate them. The following section provides a theoretical understanding of critical pedagogy as a teaching philosophy.

● **General Theoryof Critical Pedagogy**

Through critical pedagogy, the individuals find a voice for themselves by questioning established norms and power structures. Henry Giroux, the American -Canadian scholar who is often known as the founding theorist of critical pedagogy in the US, suggests the understanding of pedagogy as a practice for freedom. It is important to realise that the pedagogical foundation at all levels of education forms the basis of all civil, political and moral interactions of individuals. As a teaching philosophy, critical pedagogy persuades educators to develop a critical approach amongst their students towards the established practices of oppression and power. Paulo Freire in his foundational theories on critical pedagogy highlights this very aspect of practical life (Freire, 1968). Critical theory involves becoming aware of and questioning the status quo of society. A teacher, who uses critical pedagogy as an educational tool, encourages students to question and challenge inequalities that exist in families, schools, workplace, and societies. These ideas can be observed in the works of Ira Shor, where he says that a student can be critically conscious by thinking, reading, writing and speaking while exploring the underlying meanings of social realities.The whole idea is that of challenging clichés (Shor, 1992). In the next section, we will discuss the relationship of critical pedagogy with the issues focussed upon by postmodern feminist thinkers.

● **Amalgamating Critical Pedagogy and Postmodern Feminism**

It is through education, whether formal or non-formal, that the individual for the first time gets introduced to the diffusion of power and to the ambiguities of empowerment. As claimed by Julia Kristeva, individuality and subjectivity of people are not taken into account by the dominant political discourses. Postmodern feminism does not see feminism as a collective movement and thus gives it more flexibility to explore novel methods like those of critical pedagogy to address contemporary forms of marginalisation faced by women. Postmodern feminism rejects the idea that women are a homogeneous group and supports the view that women should not be accorded a pluralistic identity. This is supported by Kristeva's suggestion of avoiding blanket phrases like 'all women are exploited' or 'women are exploited in all aspects.' As per this understanding, critical pedagogy emerges as an appropriate approach for catering to the empowerment-related requirements arising from unique forms of marginalisation faced by each and every woman. Critical pedagogy enables the individuals to find a voice for themselves and question established norms and power structures.

One can identify the manifestations of conventional practices of treating women and their needs as secondary, which are deep-rooted in the Indian society being mirrored by the Indian education system. A glaring example of this could be the underrepresentation of women in governmental committees making policies for improvement of educational standards in India. In India, though Right to Education is a fundamental right which technically is guaranteed to each and every citizen, the ground realities point towards "…illusion of education's neutrality and the myth of equality of opportunity… (Arnot, 1982)." The authors in the next section suggest how critical pedagogy can be effectively applied in India.

● **Critical Pedagogy in India – How?**

The education policies made in India have, more often than not, considered students to be passive acceptors rather than active participants. It was in the National Curriculum Framework 2005, that this problem was recognised and a need was felt to establish a sense of agency amongst the students. With deeper probing, it has been found out that "...theories formally considered to be sexually neutral in their objectivity are found instead to reflect a consistent masculine bias (Gilligan, 1994)." This notion applies to India where such ideas are counterproductive to both male and female students in terms of their relationship with the society. In order to make a sincere effort towards eliminating gender differences in the Indian educational system, an innovative approach based on critical pedagogy can be adopted by the educators.

The most important step in this direction could be encouraging the individuals to challenge themselves. By this, we mean thinking critically and challenging social structures like patriarchy, stereotypes associated with women, nature of interpersonal relationships between men and women in society, etc. Students could be encouraged to question the common social narratives and to implement the same in the classroom setup. Challenging power structures form the bedrock of critical pedagogy, which in a classroom setup could be affirmed through a more dynamic teacher-student relationship, where learning is a two-way process. Transformation from a lecture-based classroom to a discussion-based classroom is one such tool. Alternative views should find acceptance in a classroom where dominant traditional narratives and unconventional ones can exist side by side. The traditional methods of assessing the student's knowledge of the subject matter can be changed in order to encourage development of critical thinking skills rather than confining them to one right answer. The authors seek to offer an insight into the gender related concerns of Indian women in the field of education, for which the authors advocate the use of critical pedagogy.

FILLING IN THE GAPS

In India, we see a complex web of linkages when it comes to challenges faced by women in their daily lives. Caste, class, religion or any other form of segregation does not solely determine women's condition. Rather, the lived reality of a female in India is always an interplay of a number of factors. For example, in a family that is economically well-off, women must not be facing any discrimination or problems is a flawed perception. "Critical Pedagogy understands

that economic factors alone do not predetermine who has power and who does not…" (Kincheloe, 2008). The authors, therefore, emphasise upon the importance of gender sensitivity rather than just gender neutrality when it comes to policy making in education.

● **Gender Sensitivity in Education**

Curiosity forms an indispensable part of student life and gender neutrality being the norm in Indian mainstream education, a horde of issues from puberty to sex education to menstruation, etc are dragged under the blanket cover of 'taboos. Mishandling of curiosity or ignoring it altogether might often lead to anti-social activities by certain individuals. Problems like this and many others can be resolved when a gender sensitive approach is adopted in education. A good example of the same is the construction of exclusive toilets for females in educational institutions which has resulted in higher enrolment and retention rates. Gender sensitivity can be a base for special provisions that need to be in place to address requirements exclusive to women like – responsibility of the elder female sibling to look after her younger brothers and sisters, safety concerns while travelling to school and within the premises, objectification of females as their husband's property which discourages parents to invest in their education, poor learning outcomes and failure at examination due to the absence of a level playing field in comparison to boys, forced withdrawal due to early marriage, tending to domestic chores, lack of female teachers, etc. Pedagogy should not be a reason for females to not receive education and thus a gender sensitive approach that aims at empowering women should be adopted.

● **Right To Question**

India aspires to build an inclusive democratic community and critical pedagogy can provide the necessary social skills to individuals for the same. In the case of women, it becomes all the more important because their position in relation to power structures and understanding of the political nature of the society that they are a part of, automatically makes their actions social in nature. Betterment of the society depends to a great extent on the condition of its women and hence they should be trained to question their exclusion from power since ages and to develop their ability to shape and actively contribute to civic life.

CONCLUSION

Society as a whole has "…masculine man is the one who achieves and the feminine woman is the one who underachieves…" (Arnot, 1982). Why is there mostly a 'father' in the field of science and not a 'mother'? Why is the male cricket team deified in India while the people do not even know the names of most female players? Why is it that a female politician is seen as an exception who finds it very difficult to demand obedience? Why are the professional advancements of women often associated with their gender? Are females actually bad drivers or are we conditioned to think so? Why have democratic countries had very few female finance ministers? Why are leadership capabilities of women considered inadequate giving rise to positions of pseudo-leadership held by their male counterparts? Why was a large number of women in the Indian Mars Mission a peculiarity? Do female actors throughout the world really deserve to be paid less than the male actors? Why do engineering colleges in India have a male dominant demography?

The answers to these and many more questions can be found out if we go to the root of the problem, that is, the secondary status of women in society. Women in India still have to fight for their identity independent of whose wife, sister, daughter or mother they are. Indian education in practice has been observed to recognise the dual origins and destinations of male and female students. This is true in terms of wage employment, domestic labour, social relations and intra-household dynamics. Questioning the society, traditional belief systems, common practices, and most importantly, questioning their aspiration of themselves is probably the training that Indian women need in order to make progress. Education has always proved to be one of the most effective tools of social change. Marginalised and oppressed communities have often found solace and development through education. Women in India have been one such community who have experienced progress through education. In the contemporary Indian society with global interaction, the issues and challenges faced by women have taken new forms in which critical pedagogy can offer efficient solutions. The limits and influences that gender struggles pose on women in the political and economic context can be effectively addressed through this method - both during policy making and its implementation.

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