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Empowerment of socially oppressed through literacy

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Empowerment of socially oppressed through literacy*

D. Vasudeva Rao**

Section I

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

In our country the Constitution has given special provision to some socially disadvantaged sections in the areas of Education and Employment so that they can compete with others and join the mainstream. But in reality even after 50 years of independence some sections of the society could not make use of these reservations to their advantage. Prominent among them are women in general and SCs in particular. Though the Government through 73rd Amendment has given special reservation for women their participation in PRI is very much lacking. The egalitarian policy has not percolated to the target groups in the desired magnitude.

In the context of Human Resource Development and Empowerment, education comes in the first place. The National Policy on Education has laid stress to improve the educational standards of weaker sections like SCs. But the expansion of out-reach for these communities is very low. According to 1991 Census the literacy rates of SCs were 37.41. Among the females it is even lower at 23.76 per cent. Another depressing factor is the poor coverage of SCs in the literacy programmes, which has been as low as 20 per cent. Hence an earnest attempt should be made to take up studies exclusively covering SCs in general and females belonging to these categories in particular to understand their problems through direct interactions and suggest ways and means to facilitate strategies so that they can become literates, empower themselves and join the mainstream slowly and steadily with time.

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Government Initiatives

Article 41 emphasised educational development while Article 45 set the goal of universalisation of elementary education within a stipulated time. The New Education Policy (1986), Universalisation of Elementary Education, National Literacy Mission (1987) achieved considerable results in this direction. District Primary Education Project (1994) was launched in select districts with a view to improve the internal consistency on educational institutions by minimising incidence of wastage and stagnation of tribal children and encouraging girls education to step up rate of enrolment. However the goals of universalisation of elementary education remain unfulfilled.

The “UNESCO Education for All” (EFA) reports on the elimination of gender disparities in enrolments showed that 57 per cent of the estimated 104 million children in 5 – 10 year age group, who are out of school world wide, are believed to be Girls. India may not meet 2005 deadline, to achieve gender parity in enrolment, although 15 States and 4 Union Territories have adopted legislation, making primary education compulsory. Apart from Governments, Civil Society institutions need constantly to reinforce the moral and legal duty cost on parents to ensure quality education of their wards.

To be sure the 93rd Constitutional Amendment adopted by Indian Parliament in 2002, is an endorsement of India’s commitment to the Dakar Frame Work : it entrenches school education as a FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT, for children in 6-14 years. Thus from the Government’s side, all the concerted efforts are being made to enrol and educate the girl child.

The Uses of Literacy

When illiteracy begins to impinge upon livelihoods issues it becomes critical. Illiteracy often results in missed opportunities. Women usually receive lower wages than men, yet it is rationalized by the false perception that women work less hard than men. Both men and women often earn less

than the minimum wage but they are often unaware of the Minimum Wages Act.

Illiteracy and lack of information can adversely affect human rights. Legal literacy and awareness of human rights violations is vital if people are to be empowered. Literacy is crucial for both.

By adopting a narrow view of literacy as being synonymous only with basic reading, writing and numeracy skills, the concept of literacy as empowering is devalued.

“Literacy is an empowering skill which reduces many fears, of being lost, cheated, manipulated by others. It also increases access to many types of information that one wants/needs to achieve a more satisfying life, to carry out one’s responsibilities more efficiently/ effectively, even to challenge/ reject, if necessary what has been learnt through one’s socialization in an unequal society. It thus provides the potential (but not the guarantee) for a better life politically, culturally, socially and economically.”*

Section II

Review of Literature

Lakshmaiah (2001) feels that the main objective of education development is conceived to reduce the dependency syndrome, reinforce the inner strength of the individual, inculcate self esteem and self reliance, equip individuals with necessary skills to have access to gainful employment, develop scientific outlook, facilitate active peoples participation, etc. As per 1991 Census the percentage of literacy among tribals is only 29.6 per cent, while among tribal women it is the lowest (18.19 per cent). Equally disappointing factor is unemployment among the few tribals who were educated.

Singh (2001) opines that empowerment through law is no doubt very necessary but the improvement of the status of women require a change in the attitudes and roles of both men and women. When women are educated they can become potential sources for harnessing community resources for general wellbeing. It is also the surest way of contributing to

* Report of Expert Group on “Evaluation of Literacy Campaign in India” (1994), pg. 24.

economic growth and overall development. But, the present patriarchal biases coupled with economic dependency, ignorance and lack of organised effort hinder many a woman from realising her full potential in the society.

Yadappanavar (2002) in his study on “Tribal Education in Mayurbunj” of Orissa observed that the tribes are mainly concentrated in areas which are generally unfit for intensive cultural practices and their settlement pattern is far from dispersed and hence their physical distance from the schools is quite large. Also the willingness of the parents to send their children over long distances to school is very low. The gap in matters of food, dress, architecture and environment of the schools, and their habitations compel children to pull out the school.

The mix of economic and cultural factors sharply divided the tribals from the others. The willingness of the teacher to come to the tribal school regularly is another impediment in the functioning of the primary schools. The flexibility of school timings and attendance requirement, etc. deter girls to attend the school along with their domestic and seasonal agricultural activities.

Accessibility to schools to the poor people is much less than non-poor and the gender gap in the services is larger among poor people is the opinion expressed by Sunita Nambiyar (2002). Gender Empowerment Measure is a variable to measure the relative empowerment of women and men in political and economic spheres of activity. Thanks to the 73rd Constitution Amendment, the women Sarpanches and members have shifted the focus from political power games to civic amenities and attacking social evils like domestic violence, alcoholism and child marriage.

Pant (2000) in his study of three districts of Bihar on “Education as a Priority for Scheduled Castes” felt that even after five decades of independence, SCs and STs have recorded a relatively low literacy rates compared to rest of the population. He feels that the progress initiated to address the problem of illiteracy or poverty could not produce desired amount of affect because they were implemented on ad hoc basis nor contain viable linkages closely rooted in peoples activity and social fabric of the community. He suggests that motivating the people to come forward and participate in the programmes willingly and whole heartedly will go a long way to eradicate illiteracy among SCs and STs on sustainable basis. He suggests some important remedial measures to increase the enrolment and reducing the dropouts among SCs and STs in general and females in particular.

Athreya and Sheela Rani (1996) in their study on "Literacy and Empowerment" have analysed the problem historically and through a Case Study in Pudukkottai district of Tamilnadu, demonstrated how the literacy campaigns have substantially empowered women. The authors have analysed the literacy differentials among different developing countries between 1965 and 1989. Similarly from 1901 and 1991 the All India figures have brought out the regional inequalities in literacy. The rural and urban differences as well as gender gap in literacy rates have demonstrated that female literacy rates have improved over decades and that there has been some closing of the gap between male and female ratios except in BIMARU states. But if one considers the rural female literacy, it is quite dismal. In some large and popular states the female literacy situation is abysmal while district level data revealed even more shocking pictures.

Neeta Tapan (2000) has pointed out from her study some of the important impediments that come in the way of female literacy such as poverty, social and cultural traditions, early marriage, household work, and insufficient school space for girls, distantly located schools, inflexible timings and lack of female teachers play an important role in non-enrolment and faster drop out of girls from schools.

In his study on "Demographic Parameters as tools to correct Spatial Backwardness", Vasudeva Rao (2003) tried to bring out the relationship between female literacy and the child population in (0-6) age group. The study was done in Andhra Pradesh by making use of 2001 Census data at micro (Mandal) level. For the Andhra Pradesh State, 2001 Census recorded 53.8 per cent female literacy rate while child population (0-6) years was 12.4 and the coefficient of correlation is (-0.377) which is statistically significant. Though Andhra Pradesh has recorded the lowest population decadal growth rate of 13.9 per cent between 1991-2001 and 53.8 per cent female literacy rate, there are some pockets like slums, rural areas, SC/ST dominated areas where the population growth rate is not that encouraging, incidentally in these areas, the female literacy rate is observed to be low. Hence it has been suggested that, to reduce the population growth rate, female literacy rate has to be improved, as it happens to be one of the important factors, which is evidenced by Statistical Analysis (Agnihotri, 2002).

Section III

Government Policy for Empowerment of Women :

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women.

Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, Plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. From the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

India has also ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights of women. Key among them is the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993.

The Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcome Document adopted by the UNGA Session on Gender Equality and Development & Peace for the 21st century, titled "Further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action" have been unreservedly endorsed by India for appropriate follow up.

Gender disparity manifests itself in various forms, the most obvious being the trend of continuously declining female ratio in the population in the last few decades. Social stereotyping and violence at the domestic and societal levels are some of the other manifestations. Discrimination against girl children, adolescent girls and women persists in parts of the country.

Consequently, the access of women particularly those belonging to weaker sections including Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes/ Other backward Classes and minorities, majority of whom are in the rural areas and in the informal, unorganized sector – to education, health and productive resources, among others, is inadequate. Therefore, they remain largely marginalized, poor and socially excluded.

Goal and Objectives

The goal of this Policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The Policy will be widely disseminated so as to encourage active participation of all stakeholders for achieving its goals. Specifically, the objectives of this Policy include

- (i) Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential
- (ii) The *de-jure* and *de-facto* enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil
- (iii) Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation
- (iv) Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.
- (v) Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women
- (vi) Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
- (vii) Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process
- (viii) Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child; and
- (ix) Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.

(a) Economic Empowerment of women

Poverty Eradication, Micro Credit, Women and Economy

Globalization

Globalization has presented new challenges for the realization of the goal of women's equality, the gender impact of which has not been systematically evaluated fully. However, from the micro-level studies that were commissioned by the Department of Women & Child Development, it is evident that there is a need for re-framing policies for access to employment and quality of employment. Benefits of the growing global economy have been unevenly distributed leading to wider economic disparities, the feminization of poverty, increased gender inequality through often deteriorating working conditions and unsafe working environment especially in the informal economy and rural areas. Strategies will be designed to enhance the capacity of women and empower them to meet the negative social and economic impacts, which may flow from the globalization process.

(b) Social Empowerment of Women

Education

Equal access to education for women and girls will be ensured. Special measures will be taken to eliminate discrimination, universalize education, eradicate illiteracy, create a gender-sensitive educational system, increase enrolment and retention rates of girls and improve the quality of education to facilitate life-long learning as well as development of occupation/vocation/technical skills by women. Reducing the gender gap in secondary and higher education would be a focus area. Sectoral time targets in existing policies will be achieved, with a special focus on girls and women, particularly those belonging to weaker sections including the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes/Other Backward Classes/Minorities. Gender sensitive curricula would be developed at all levels of educational system in order to address sex stereotyping as one of the causes of gender discrimination.

Health

In accordance with the commitment of the National Population Policy (2000) to population stabilization, this Policy recognizes the critical need

of men and women to have access to safe, effective and affordable methods of family planning of their choice and the need to suitably address the issues of early marriages and spacing of children. Interventions such as spread of education, compulsory registration of marriage and special programmes like BSY should impact on delaying the age of marriage so that by 2010 child marriages are eliminated.

Nutrition, Drinking Water and Sanitation, Housing and Shelter, Environment, Science and Technology

Women in Difficult Circumstances

In recognition of the diversity of women's situations and in acknowledgement of the needs of specially disadvantaged groups, measures and programmes will be undertaken to provide them with special assistance. These groups include women in extreme poverty, destitute women, women in conflict situations, women affected by natural calamities, women in less developed regions, the disabled widows, elderly women, single women in difficult circumstances, women heading households, those displaced from employment, migrants, women who are victims of marital violence, deserted women and prostitutes etc.

Panchayati Raj Institutions

The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Indian Constitution have served as a breakthrough towards ensuring equal access and increased participation in political power structure for women. The PRIs will play a central role in the process of enhancing women's participation in public life. The PRIs and the local self Governments will be actively involved in the implementation and execution of the National Policy for Women at the grassroots level.

Thus a cursory look at some of the studies reviewed above leads a pointer towards the "real impediments" that are to be corrected, before attempting to make SC/ST women literates as a first step towards empowerment. Each study has focussed on one single factor. To get a holistic picture and the synergic view of one variable on the other, attempt should be made to involve more than one variable that too in their natural environment. This, it is hoped, will bring out the 'compound effect' of all the variables responsible into light and the solutions thereof.

Points that need special attention are :

A diagnostic analysis of what is happening in the field with particular reference to literacy, self-employment, self-management and empowerment of the women belonging to SCs.

Further, the following points are to be examined to have a clear understanding of the real field situation.

1. Pattern of enrolment / dropouts among SC children (gender wise) in comparison with rest of the community,
2. Socio-economic activities of the SC families (child labour, migration),
3. Amenities / facilities offered by schools to SC,
4. Participation of women in literacy programmes - their success rate and follow up,
5. Role played by SC women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and other Civil Society Organisations,
6. Special strategies required to increase the literacy rates among SC and other disadvantaged groups, and
7. Problems faced by these groups in improving their literacy status.

To improve the status of SC Communities (specially women) Government must focus on the following aspects :

1. occupational pattern like agriculture bonded labour / child labour, menial occupations they pursue, hereditary occupations;
2. high indebtedness;
3. location of schools / learning centres in / near their inhabitations;
4. selection of appropriate instructors;
5. suitable curriculum in their dialect (mother tongue) – slowly to be switched over to the local language.
6. appropriate strategies for their emancipation and empowerment need to be discovered. No tailor made solutions can solve the problem overnight.

The problem of illiteracy and other related issues in the context of SC/ST, can be better understood in the backdrop of the environment in which they are living and their subsequent interaction with it. Some of the plausible reasons for the low literacy among SC/ST females that need to be analysed are :

1. social factors (upper castes threat)
2. state of primary schools
3. location of their housing colony at the periphery of the village and geographical location of school in the village
4. normal residence in the hilly region (low density) hence no schools in their habitat
5. high dropout rate due to
 - (i) Low quality of services
 - Poor Infrastructure
 - Low level of teaching
 - Teacher's (low) attendance
 - (ii) Seasonal requirement of children in agricultural operations

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