



Tracing the Growth of Women and Wisdom in Higher Education

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OPEN ACCESS

Article Citation:

Dr. Ishita¹, "Tracing the growth of Women and Wisdom in Higher Education", International Journal of Recent Trends in Multidisciplinary Research, March-April 2025, Vol 5(02), 86-88.

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Published by 5th Dimension Research Publication

Abstract: This essay discusses the problematics of the ontology of women's education in tandem with issues of Higher education. It discusses the recursive patterns detected in the contemporary education trends, which have emerged essentially from the ideological collapse of the ancient paradigm of education as an institution. It also explores the cultural and social hurdles, the orthodox purview of primacy to male education, and the resultant expectations, which do not consider the issue of gender disparity in education. Consequentially, there is an imbalance between the development ratio of genders. This imbalance leads to the further appropriation of the long-existing gender roles without realizing the relevance of women's participation in Higher Education. The importance of education in the growth of the society and civilization was realized much earlier and yet the role of education remained on priority only for the male population. Contemporary India witnesses an increase in the number of women being heralded in the realm of higher education. Nonetheless, the divide between the genders enrolled in higher education is pretty much evident. The current paper is intended to strategically address, evaluate and understand the process and problems for the women pursuing higher education in India.

Key Words: Higher Education, Nididhyasana, Women's Education, Rishika, Hegemonic, Hierarchical, Enrolment, Development Index, Inclusive.

1. Introduction

The monumental development and concretization of the education system in India over the last sixty decades have been commendable. Women issues add a new dimension to the understanding of the choices and challenges to Higher Education for women. Post-independence, the importance of Higher education has become more obvious to some of the oblivious masses as well. THE REPORT OF THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION COMMISSION (DECEMBER 1948 – AUGUST 1949) VOLUME I which consisted of educational aficionados like Dr S Radhakrishnan and Dr Zakir Hussain as its appointed members, forayed the attention towards women education with special provisions. The Chapter VI, 'Post-Graduate Training and Research: Arts and Science' starting from page 122 of the report comprises of a section on research. In this chapter, Position of Research at the Universities up to 1945 is discussed and mentions about the dissatisfactory state of research in the country. "But no organized attempt was made to train students in methods of research and to develop schools of research at any university. It was only in 1914 that Sir Asutosh Mookherjee founded the first post-graduate departments at the Calcutta University and placed post-graduate training and research there on a proper footing." (127).

Post First World War, many new universities came into existence and the degrees of Ph.D., D.Litt, and D.Sc. were instituted and were awarded to students on successful completion of their researches. These degree holders more than often constituted the teaching faculty of various universities. Arrangements for Training, Selection of Students, Selection of Subject, Supervision and Facilities, Requirements for the Award of the Degree, Publication, Research Fellowships, The D.Litt. and D.Sc. Degrees and Research by College and University Teachers were other issues discussed in the 'Research' section of this report. The section also provides us with a comprehensive detail of the purpose and process of research.

“These fellowships are not merely rewards for ability but opportunities for independent study and work and preparation for high academic positions. They should not be too many in number nor too great in value. Their grades, salary-rates and superannuation pension should be equivalent to those of the teaching staff. The larger universities may have 20 to 30 of these fellowships distributed over different branches of study, and every year two or three may be selected after a searching competition. The work which they will undertake should be left to their free impulse.” (132-33).

The Chapter XII of the report deals with ‘Women’s Education’, its importance, the inclusion of special courses and future of women education. According to the report, the educated, conscientious mother can be an important early influence in carving and moulding the character and intelligence of the child. It also entails the inclusion of special courses like Home Economics, Nursing, Teaching, Fine Arts etc. Interestingly, the section on the promotion of women’s education revolves primarily around the sphere of domesticity for women. She is expected to be educated to create educated children or to be intelligent and efficient mothers to them. Although the report recognizes the travesty of Women’s education, it still heralds the role of education as a facilitator of good homemakers. Thus, the conflicting positions of occupational dilemma and educational purpose get divulged in this report.

“Thus, to a Considerable degree, the problem of occupational training for women is a part of the educational problem in general. There is needed, however, a fuller recognition of the equal status of women and equal opportunity both for general education and for their life work. The homemaker needs training for her work as well as does the engineer or the lawyer.” (349). The committee makes it clear that even though it is not the right way, it is neither wrong to not create an identical set of responsibilities for men and women. The future plans for the committee include Present Conditions in Women & Education, Suggestions for Improvement, Coeducation, Appraisals of Women’s Education, Recommendations and Equal pay for equal work. University Education Commission (1948) is a forerunner in education pattern created by the government of free India, to demand adequate efforts towards the education of women and seeing them as instrumental towards sustainable growth and development of the nation. However, looking at the current state of participation of women in higher education, the scenario is if not entirely bleak, the improvement has been meagre and the disparity still persists. The output of compensatory measures adopted by the governments at the state and central level needs a fair evaluation to understand and address the gender-based issues in higher education. The privileged and underprivileged sections need special and dedicated attention to understand and reduce the gap between them both. The inefficiencies and difficulties faced by the Government of India for bridging the socioeconomic gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups have not really materialized into massive success for the welfare and promotion of women candidates yet. The creation of an efficiently inclusive society for all genders is still an onerous and yet an indispensable goal to the Indian society.

The relevance of higher education in the intellectual, social, economic, political, and overall growth of women in a society has always been a pressing concern for Indian government as educated and independent women are a mark of a developing and evolving society. They comprise a large share of the total population and their evolution means doubling the production and efficiency of the country as a whole. Highly educated women’s contribution is not a myth but the vital ingredients for constituting a mighty nation. Education in India has had quite a rich background. The evidence is often found in the history and religion for the existence of Higher Education as early as 5th century, BC when Taxila was the earliest recorded centre of higher education in India although its status as a university is still obscure. In the modern sense of the term, University, Nalanda is one of the oldest, organized universities. However, in the Post Independence period, the potentiality and glory of Higher education were regained. In the lamentable state of affairs for women’s education, we often hear their visceral and incisive stories of being the sacrificial lamb for the sake of better education or financial aid of their male counterparts, more than often the male siblings or due to early marriages and responsibilities and sometimes simply for not allowing them more power or liberty than what women ‘deserved’. The desperateness of hegemonic, hierarchical human survival in a socially and culturally decomposed environment is simply a signifier of the amount of education and emotional or rational development that human beings need and deserve.

The state of women in terms of education was pretty much evolved and inclusive in the Vedic Age. The early period of the Vedic Education from around 1500 B.C. to 1000 B.C. the education was more for developing effective survival strategies for civilizational growth and improvement. The oral transmission of verses marks the beginning of ancient Indian education, although with time it evolved into a well-organized system with defined conditions and rituals and the subject of study or codes of conduct for teachers and pupils. The aim of Higher education was to make the learner reach the pinnacle of perfection as a human being and hence attaining higher education was given a sacramental meaning and respect.

Education for regular students was different from the specialized education for different kind of priests. The entry into formal studies was initiated with the *Upanayana* and this formalization was done to categorize education into the holy realm of things, a sacred activity. *Sharavana* as in listening and *Manana* or meditation were initial methods of learning which would lead to the final stage in learning *nididhyasana*, the highest form of meditation. Therefore a pattern of higher education existed in Vedic age too. Five *Vidyapithas* were established by Sankaracharya for providing mass education in 7th Century. *Parishads* were large institutions with a number of teachers and students, and resonate with the idea of colleges in current times. *Sammelana* were large gatherings, where scholars met to compete and discuss. These institutions invoked interest in further studies of specialized areas and higher studies. This also formed the model for present-day universities. During the Vedic period, the position of the women was relatively better and they used to access the higher education but with the course

of the time, she lost those basic rights. Education for women in ancient India surfaced during the early Vedic period but declined later.

“Most of the Indian scriptures Rig Veda and Upanishads mention about several women sages and seers. However, after 500 B.C., the position of women started to decline. But the Islamic invasion had restricted the freedom and rights of women.”(Chakraborty).

Education of girls saw changes from Vedic period to Post Vedic period. In Pre Vedic times, women participated in all religious activities actively. Both in Vedic and Post Vedic times, they could undergo education only in their homes and could be taught only by the male elders of the family. They were not expected to enter *gurukulas* away from home for continuing their education. This is similar to how many girls in present-day too are not allowed the pursuit of higher education as they are forbidden from going away from home to places of higher studies and stay in hostels or paying guests. We read of women scholars of the period who overcame many obstacles and outshone men with their scholarly abilities. Gargi and Matreyi are such renowned scholars. While men sages have been referred to as *Rishi*, the women sages have been referred to as *Rishika*. However, it was only a few women who were able to take their education beyond the primary and secondary level to higher education. Towards the end of Post Vedic period, there was a change in approach and fathers were expected to marry their daughter before puberty and education for girls were stopped after Marriage. “Manu, who exerted a great influence on the social customs of the time was of the opinion that marriage of girls was equal to initiation into studies of Vedas.” (Ramachandran and Kumar 17).

In the Post Vedic age, many centres of higher education existed. Ujjain has been mentioned by Kalidasa in his works often as it was a famous centre for the study of poetic works and Brahmanical studies. Mithila was the most important centre of learning in 12th to 15th century. The college of Mithila was famous for *Nyaya Shastra*, i.e Law Studies, and *Tark Shastra* or Logic. Medieval era was characterized by social evils like *Purdah* system which cocooned the world of Indian women further, making the task of higher education of women furthermore difficult. However, rulers like Iltutmish and Akbar tried to avail ample opportunities for education of women.

Colonial era drew endeavours and attention towards the education of women once again, under the patronage of various eminent leaders and social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. Baba Saheb Ambedkar with few others was primarily involved with the emancipation and attainment of education for women of the lower castes.

University Education Commission (1948) was set for the purpose of more nuanced growth and development in the education field after Independence. Higher education was taken up as a huge responsibility and the advancement in women education needed a boost. A lot of improvements were practically noticeable in the growth of female literacy rate post Independence. Now, India has a third largest higher education system in the world but gender-based educational disparities among various social sections is still an issue, which needs to be tackled.

“While more young women are enrolled in higher education than ever before—and apparently more successful in clearing 10th-standard board exams than young men—they are either marrying early or not finding or not looking for jobs, according to an India Spend analysis of various data. The enrolment of girls in higher education increased from 39% to 46% from 2007 to 2014, but female participation in India’s labour force declined to a low of 27% in 2014 from 34% in 1999, according to a 2015 study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Almost 12 million women are enrolled in undergraduate courses, but few continue to professional courses; 600,000 women were enrolled for diploma courses in 2013, the latest year for which data are available. Even fewer women sign on for PhDs; only 40% of PhD candidates are female.” (Salve 2).

For adequate developmental opportunities, it is vital to have developmental policies and programmes that address gender disparities openly. Educated women can demand social justice and consequently command and preserve respect for themselves. Therefore, education serves as an agent of social change. Educational success leads to Economic success and literacy is the formative agent of social cohesion and national identity. Empowering and liberating women is also the empowerment and liberation of the society itself. Therefore, female education and developmental indicators often show a directly proportionate relationship. Education in contemporary India is the supremely safe and secure harbour for the women in India. On the other hand, they are national development inducing asset to the country too. The indicator of their happiness and that of a nation lies in the fact that these educated women show increased participation in social processes and activities, increased economic productivity, improvement in health, delayed age at marriage, lower fertility, increased political participation, and effective investments in the next generation. Educational facilities meant for the exclusive use of women only allowed families to feel more comfortable in providing access to these institutes and facilities to their girls. Consequently, the growth of women’s participation in educational field has increased massively due to the Indian government, education authorities and academicians’ persistent efforts. Nevertheless, the issues of access, equity, and quality still continue to be the areas of concern.

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