



# The politics of gender, caste, and education in India

INDIA HAS A LONG HISTORY OF GENDER AND CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION AND SUBORDINATION THAT INFLUENCES ACCESS TO EDUCATION. THE COUNTRY HAS MADE SIGNIFICANT ADVANCES BUT A LOT MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE. [VIMALA RAMACHANDRAN](#) DISCUSSES.





Caste and gender relations have continued to exert a strong influence on people's access to education and livelihoods. If we go by current media reports on the situation of women and girls or the predicament of erstwhile untouchable communities or tribal groups and Muslims, it seems as if social and gender relations are resistant to change, which resonates with the common belief that the social texture of India remains impervious to modern day reality. This is far from the truth.

Over the last century, India has changed in many ways; in some situations, we have moved forward while in others, we have moved backwards. It is true that some issues have been resistant to change – like the all-pervasive son preference. Even communities and regions that did not have a strong son preference have gradually adopted the practice of undervaluing girls.

Let's start with the sex ratio. In 1901, the sex ratio was 972 (females per 1000 males), it went down to 946 in 1951, 927 in 1991 and marginally up to 943 in 2011. Another significant indicator is the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB)<sup>1</sup> that points to the persistence of son preference in the country. Apart from the fact that there are significant differences between the north and some north-western states and the southern and eastern states of India, what is interesting is that urban-rural differences are skewed in favour of rural areas, with Child Sex Ratio (CSR) in rural areas being 919 and only 902 in urban areas as per Census 2011. This is a telling comment on Indian society – more years of education for men and women and relatively better economic status do not improve the chances of survival of girl children. According to Census 2011, rural child sex ratio is higher as compared to urban areas in 26 states.

While girls' participation in education has improved in leaps and bounds, it is indeed paradoxical that the sex ratio has remained adverse and work-participation



*The Census commissioner reports that 'In rural India, there are 74 districts with CSR < 850 in 2011, whereas, there were 54 districts in this group in 2001. In 38 districts, the decline in CSR has been more than 50 points. In 51 districts, there is increase in CSR with 20 or points'.*

ratios have declined. Understanding and unravelling the complex interplay between modernity and tradition on the one hand and between economic realities and social structures on the other can be an exciting field of study.

Using the education domain, this short essay tries to capture this complex issue. In the pre-Independence period (before 1947), social reforms and leaders of the Indian national movement positioned women's education as a driver of modernisation. While many traditionalists voiced their concern about its impact on social and familial relations, they were outnumbered. The importance of modern and secular education for all was recognised and accepted as important.

Interestingly, as it turned out, the concerns of the traditionalists were unwarranted – the kind of education that was imparted did not challenge gender norms or social norms. Curriculum, textbooks and teacher preparation processes did not touch the so-called sensitive issues like gender relations in the family and community and caste relations. It was almost as if the values of equality and non-discrimination that were enshrined in the Constitution of India were conveniently overlooked.

How was this possible? After all, the Constitution was the guiding spirit of Independent India. The answer to this puzzle is quite bizarre. Equality was reduced to numbers – the proportion of women at different levels of education, and the participation of SC and ST reflected in Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and Net Enrolment Ratio (NER). Reducing equality to access and formal participation enabled successive governments to overlook the spirit of the constitution. We chugged along, claiming gradual movement to the goals of equality. At the same time, textbooks continued to portray stereotypes, while the realities of the daily lives of women, rural communities, tribal groups and the harsh existence

of Dalits found no space in the educational material that we consumed. Affirmative action was equal to reservations in colleges or Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) quota in schools. Affirming the spirit of equality was never on the agenda; as a result, we still hear of exclusion of children from mid-day-meals, or the resistance of teachers of the so-called higher castes to intermixing on an equal footing with children and teachers of castes and communities they feel are 'lower' or 'inferior'. My own work in the last 25 years has shown existing caste or community and gender biases among teachers, between teachers and children, and also among children.

The mid-1980s heralded a churning in education with the Ministry of Education publication of the *Challenge to Education*. The National Policy on Education of 1986 made a radical statement on the transformative potential of education 'Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well-conceived edge in favour of women. The National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, training and orientation of teachers, decision-makers, administrators and the active involvement of educational institutions'.<sup>2</sup> Similar statements were made to bring about alteration in the lives of tribal and Dalit children. While several small and large-scale projects were initiated in keeping with the provisions of this policy, the fundamental structure of school education remained unchanged. Conversely, we started chasing numbers of children enrolled, drop-out rates, primary and secondary school completion rates and so on. In the race to prove that India was indeed marching ahead, we conveniently stopped asking or monitoring what and how much our children were actually learning.

The decades from the 1980s onwards

have witnessed an increase in the number of private schools. As children from the middle classes and the rich abandoned government schools, the quality of public education plummeted leaving the poor with abysmal quality education. This reinforced age-old prejudices based on caste and community. Unfortunately, since the mid-1990s, segregation based on economic criteria has only become starker.

Much has changed in India over time. Some social norms and practices are changing partly because of economic changes including economic distress, and partly due to greater exposure to the world through the eyes of the media. These changes have altered the aspirations of girls and young women and expectations of families from daughters and daughters-in-law. Having a working spouse or daughter is seen as an asset, especially among the poor and the middle classes. Expectedly, this has led to greater participation in education. But it is not clear if this has had a positive impact on the status of young girls and women in their families.

Here is another interesting paradox. Child marriage has often been cited as a serious issue and deterrent – especially when it comes to girl's education and well-being. Child marriage is a phrase that is used for any marriage that happens before the legal age of 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys. However, it is important to distinguish between two phases – one is marriage before the age of 14, and the other after 14 years and before 18 years. This distinction, however, is not made in the national data. Analysis of recently released NFHS-4 2016 data reveals that 28 per cent of women in the age group 18-29 years and 17 per cent of men in the age-group 21-29 years were married before attaining the legal age of marriage. The incidence of child marriage for girls, is highest in West Bengal (44 per cent), Bihar (42 per cent), Jharkhand (39 per cent), Rajasthan (33 per cent), Assam (33 per cent), and Madhya Pradesh (33 per cent).

Child marriage for boys is highest in Rajasthan (28 per cent) and Madhya Pradesh (28 per cent), followed by Bihar and Jharkhand (27 per cent each). The NFHS survey also noted that the prevalence of child marriage is higher in rural areas and for those with lower levels of education.

If we refer to more recent evidence, there is a silver lining. Even in poor-performing states like Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, social norms with respect to child marriage and early marriage are changing. In a recent qualitative study by Ramachandran et al. 2018, it was found that the incidence of child marriage has come down drastically in rural areas signifying that in the 4-5 years preceding the qualitative study, not one girl or boy was married before the age of 14 in the six sample villages of Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand. With almost universal enrolment in elementary schools, nearly all the children in the sample households were studying or completed class 8 before dropping out. The investigation found a two-way relationship between secondary education and early marriage – higher levels of school education postpone the age of marriage and when girls for any reason drop out, the chances of them getting married are also high. This phenomenon is affirmed through a number of sample surveys done over the last decade or more. There has been a significant decline in the incidence of child marriage across India.

Winds of change are blowing across India, with some positive trends and some norms that remain resistant to change. There are areas like child marriage or girl's participation in education where positive trends are visible, but there are areas which seem impervious to change and are disappointing such as strong son preference, violence against women at home, in society and in public spaces, and negligible change in the percentage of women who work outside the home and for wages.

In fact, as Ratna M Sudarshan's study in

2018 points out, in recent times work participation rates of women are reported to be falling. Similarly, especially participation of women from socially disadvantaged communities in professional higher education also shows a worrying trend. This is directly related to poor learning and inability of students from government schools and low cost private schools to move beyond secondary school. Sample surveys like Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and school-based National Achievement Survey (NAS) conducted by NCERT reveal that both children in rural and urban schools and in government and private schools are not learning as much as they are expected to. Learning has emerged as a huge challenge. This has led to a serious debate on the urgent need to address the burgeoning learning crisis across the country.

Eventually, everything boils down to economic progress. Discussions with students, teachers and parents reveal that positive changes in caste and gender-based relations, get a huge push if the economic situation improves – agricultural productivity, improvement in infrastructure, and expansion in opportunities for livelihood. The converse is also true, in times of economic distress, there is a danger of communities returning into old comfort zones of gender and caste or community relations. With growing agricultural distress in the last 4-5 years, many more boys and girls dropped out of school to supplement family income. Boys migrate out to get daily wage labour and girls try to support and supplement the work in the home or family farm and business. A prolonged economic downturn may adversely affect educational gains made in the decades of the 1990s and 2000s. **T**



*This short piece is based on Vimala Ramachandran and Kameshwari Jandhyala's introduction to the EPW Essays volume on Gender and Education, published by Orient Blackswan in 2019.*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Sex Ratio at birth denotes the number of female live births to 1000 male live births

<sup>2</sup>Jandhyala and Ramachandran (2014), *Women teachers and the achievement of gender and equity goals in secondary education: An exploratory study in Rajasthan* (Supported by MacArthur Foundation) Pg.28

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