

Distance Education for Women's Equality: An Indian Perspective

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Abstract

This paper attempts to outline the role of distance education in upgrading the status of women in India. In a large and developing country like India, distance education is not only cost-effective but can also reach out to all sections of society including the marginalized and the dispossessed. In spite of the fact that women's participation in all spheres of life has increased in post-independence India, there has been no concomitant change in their status. This is partly because the thrust of our policies has been not to change relations of production which also subsume gender relations, but only to commiserate with the lot of women and to "improve" it with subsidies and other "discriminatory compensation." Such ad hoc solutions provide short-term remedies but fail to diagnose the basic problem. Instead of liberal humanist reformism, a more radical approach is needed so that the gender problem can be tackled not only in relation to its internal dialectic but also in relation to the economic, ideological, and political factors that constitute its wider context. It is beyond the scope of this paper to undertake such a wide-ranging analysis. Instead it will focus specifically on how Indira Gandhi National Open University can devise effective educational strategies that can bring about social change. A Women's Studies Centre can be set up not only to provide an interdisciplinary perspective to its academic courses but also to monitor sexism in media and other cultural practices in order to generate awareness in gender-related issues, among other things. Surely a national open university would be the best site for such ideological battles to be fought and won.

Resumé

L'article s'efforce de décrire le rôle que joue la formation à distance dans l'amélioration du status féminin dans l'Inde. Dans un immense pays en voie de développement comme l'Inde, la formation à distance est non seulement rentable mais peut aussi atteindre toutes les classes sociales, même les marginales et les dépossédées. Bien que la participation des femmes dans toutes les sphères ait augmenté dans l'Inde depuis l'indépendance, aucun changement de status n'y correspond. Ceci est dû en partie au fait que nos tactiques ont poussé non pas à changer les rapports de production qui incluent aussi les rapports des sexes, mais à s'apitoyer sur le sort des femmes et à l'"améliorer" avec des subventions et d'autres "compensations discriminatoires." Ces solutions ad hoc produisent certes des remèdes temporaires mais sont loin de diagnostiquer le problème de base. Au lieu d'un réformisme humaniste libéral, ce dont nous avons besoin est une approche plus radicale qui puisse attaquer le problème des sexes non seulement en sa dialectique interne mais aussi en tenant compte des éléments économiques, idéologiques et politiques qui constituent son plus large contexte. Il est hors de la portée de cet article d'entreprendre une analyse d'une telle envergure. Ce qu'il s'efforce de faire, cependant, est de montrer comment Indira Gandhi National Open University peut développer des stratégies pédagogiques conduisant à des changements sociaux. Un Centre d'Etudes Feminines pourrait être établi non seulement pour apporter une perspective interdisciplinaire à ses cours académiques mais aussi pour surveiller le sexisme dans les media et autres pratiques culturelles afin de créer, entre autres, une compréhension des problèmes des sexes. Nous croyons qu'une université ouverte nationale devrait être le meilleur endroit où mener et gagner de telles batailles idéologiques.

Introduction

Distance education has infinite possibilities, especially in the uplifting and empowerment of women. This paper aims to address itself to the question of why, despite women's increased enrolment in educational institutions in post-independence India, there has been no concomitant uplift in their socio-economic position. Where then has our educational policy failed? Should there be a separate program for women's education? And more specifically, how can a distance teaching institution like Indira Gandhi National Open University work towards women's increased participation in the economic and developmental processes of the nation?

After 42 years of independence, only 28% of Indian women are literate. (Therefore, when we talk of higher education for women, we must remember that we are thinking only of this minority.) The Indian Constitution, progressive in spirit, stands committed to the equality of men and women. Yet gender disparities remain. The University Education Commission (1951) revealed its discriminatory bias when it perceived women's role in stereotypical terms: "...the greatest profession of women is, and probably will continue to be, that of a homemaker" (p. 122). And if they wanted equal educational opportunities they would have to "forgo home and family." And which "good" Indian woman, the epitome of self-effacement and sacrifice, would want to do that? However, there is a slight concession in the report of the Education Commission (1966). This allows women the option to have access to both home and career, stating that women should be enabled to "carry out their dual role of home-making and following a suitable career" (p. 138). Here again there is no attempt to break out of the roles traditionally assigned to women. A more radical shift takes place in the recent "National Policy on Education," approved by the Indian government in June, 1986, which focussed on the problem of women's education in the following terms:

Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralise 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, the training and orientation of teachers, decision-makers and administrators, and the active involvement of educational institutions....Women's studies will be promoted.... Major emphasis will be laid on women's participation in vocational, technical, and professional education at different levels. The policy of non-discrimination will be pursued vigorously to eliminate sex stereotyping in vocational and professional courses and to promote women's participation in non-traditional occupations, as well as in existing and emergent technologies. (p. 6)

But before we examine how this document can translate into a concrete action-plan to eliminate gender differentials, let us briefly survey the existing scenario. The participation of women in higher education in 1951-52 was

only 12.3%, but by 1985-86 the percentage had gone up to 29.6% (UGC Report). It is clear that the number of educated women had increased, but has there been any substantial change in their status? Newspaper reports inform us almost daily about dowry deaths or more appropriately, dowry murders. Young brides, not having brought in an adequate dowry, are burnt by an unscrupulous husband or in-laws in what is made to look like a "stove accident." Moreover, the report of the Committee on the Status of Women (1975) has underscored the facts that there has been increasing mortality among women and female children, that there has been greater unemployment of women after 1950 and that there has been a wider gap in the ratio of literacy and education between men and women. In spite of the increased educational opportunities available to women, their condition remains deplorable. The state has apparently spared no effort. There were only 22 universities in India in 1951. Less than four decades later we have over 160. It is clear that access to education alone cannot ensure a basic change in status; it is ultimately the kind of emphasis and the kind of education provided that can effect attitudinal changes in society and the condition of women. In any case, women have limited access to these institutions. Within Indian culture marriage and not education is the final destiny of a woman. And it is often the ambition of parents to "settle" their daughters as early as possible: for example, married at 18, I have had to struggle at various levels to complete my education at home. This is one reason why Indian women, trying to balance housework and academic pursuits, find distance education more suitable to their needs. According to a UGC Report (1976), there are 29.6% women in college-based courses, whereas in correspondence courses there are 34.3%.

In order to provide a viable alternative channel of education, Indira Gandhi National Open University was established in 1985. One of the aims of the university is to provide access to higher education to the disadvantaged and marginalized sections of society. It further seeks to provide high quality education at minimal costs to the maximum number of people all over the country. It makes use of multi-media (print, audio, and video) to reach out to its heterogeneous and diverse corpus of learners. Among other things, it is committed to minimizing the male/female divide. So far there are only 20.2% women on its rolls, which is less than the percentage

of women enrolled in college-based or correspondence courses. A brief survey of the gender distribution of students in the various courses run by IGNOU indicates:

Table 1
Gender Distribution of Students in IGNOU Courses
(1988-89)

Course	Year	Total	Female	Male
CFN*	1988	2548	1683 (62.9%)	945 (37.09%)
DIM*	1989	6586	335 (5.5%)	6171 (94.80%)
DDE*	1989	1127	387 (34.3%)	740 (65.66%)
DCW*	1989	932	481 (51.6%)	451 (48.39%)
BDP*	1989	16920	3705 (21.9%)	13215 (78.10%)

Source: Planning Division, IGNOU* (CFN, Certificate in Food and Nutrition; DIM, Diploma in Management; DDE, Diploma in Distance Education; DCW, Diploma in Creative Writing; BDP, Bachelor's Degree Programme).

It is interesting to note that the Certificate on Food and Nutrition has the maximum enrolment of 62.9% women whereas the percentage drops to a paltry 5.5% in a professional course such as the Diploma in Management. The pattern of enrolment thus remains the same as in conventional institutions. According to one report, 59% of women opt for arts, 26.75% for commerce, 11% for education, while only 2.5% enrol in science courses (Mani, 1989, p. 6).

Why is it that women choose conventional subject combinations rather than more professional courses? Women have been known to choose options such as arts, education, nursing and if there are women who have opted for engineering, technology, or computers, their number is minimal and they can only be seen as exceptions proving the rule. A career in teaching or nursing can be seen as an extension of women's traditional roles of nurturing: mother, sister, or wife. The pattern of the sexual division of labor in patriarchal society thus infiltrates the sphere of education.

Therefore the choice of subjects in higher education is largely dictated by the socialization within the family, school, and society. The sexism inherent in gender power relations is subtly inserted into textbooks and curricula. To illustrate this, let us look at examination questions, which according to Belsey (1983) are "the ultimate location of institutional power[;] they identify the boundaries of the discipline, and define what is permissible to 'discuss'...": "Although concerned about the place of man in this universe and his

predicament, Narayan is a comic writer. Do you agree?" (Panjab University, 1985, M.A. Part II); "Discuss *The Rape of the Lock* as a satire on the frivolities of women in contemporary society" (Panjab University, 1985, M.A. Part II). "Man," then, is a transcendental ahistorical category while "woman" is nonexistent as far as cosmic issues are concerned. "Woman" is defined in certain stereotypical and humiliating categories as frivolous, vain, the object of male contempt and occasional indulgence. By "interpellating" the female subject in such terms, patriarchal ideology is carrying out its function—not as "false consciousness" but as a belief system that structures and highlights the gender differentiation. Instead of performing a progressive role, education works as an "ideological operateur" (in Macherey's parlance) in the interests of maintaining the status quo.

Patriarchal ideology also ensures that even if a woman attains a high level of education, in terms of achievement, she is still liable to fall behind man. Wolpe (1978) suggests that "woman's ambition is tied to her role in marriage and to the goals directly related to marriage..." (p. 297). This is clearly symptomatic of the

internalisation of values which define adult male and female behaviour patterns...as an integral part of normal childhood development; and it is the internalisation of 'female' values which...affects woman's occupational attainment in adulthood.
(p. 302)

Among these values are submission, self-sacrifice, and tolerance, while the specific personality trait congruent with achievement is "aggression," which is termed "masculine" and therefore (in a woman) "deviant." These two polarities, the former a constant in most cultures and the latter a variable, are traceable in contemporary popular culture. For example, current TV serials like *Ramayan* set up the character of Sita as the paradigm of ideal Indian womanhood. (As Romilla Thapar the historian has pointed out, several versions of the *Ramayan* existed at different periods in history, but it is this particular version that gained prominence to the extent that it is generally taken as the only authoritative one. The role of ideology is clearly visible in suppressing the more independent Sita of the other versions.) On the other hand, recent cinema features the "angry young woman," aggressive, and revengeful. While this image no doubt provides a valuable role model, in the last analysis it generally fails, as its thrust is diverted in the interests of conformity. Love is the controlling factor and is generally represented in Byronic terms: "Love to a man's life is a thing apart, 'Tis a woman's whole existence." Such notions result in a woman's return to submission and

humility thereby vindicating patriarchal ideology. How then does one hope to "eliminate sex stereotyping" and promote "vocational and professional courses"? Can the resultant economic independence make a substantial change unless there is an overall change in societal attitudes dependent on a complex of factors? More pertinently, how can IGNOU as a distance teaching institution contribute to this enterprise?

As far as a specific program towards educating women is concerned, IGNOU has introduced a certificate course in Food and Nutrition aimed primarily at women, though men are not excluded. Diploma courses in Food and Nutrition and Child Care and Education will be launched in 1990/91. These courses are subsumed under the category of Women's Education. That the objectives cover aims such as "acquiring skills for the maintenance of family" and "community's health" are indeed laudable in a developing third world nation where malnutrition is a major problem. But the problem with such courses is the fact that individuals are "channelled into vocationally oriented courses such as technical skills or home economics on the basis of gender rather than *individual aptitude*" (Jayaweera, 1987, p. 464).

Such courses could simply come under the category "Home Science" with incentives to attract both men and women. It is for this reason that I would like to separate "Home Science" from "Women's Education." Women's Education must have a wider scope to include both basic and functional literacy. Programs must be identified through extensive research in urban and rural sectors with the specific aim of training women for the job market or entrepreneurial projects. Teaching strategies would necessarily be dictated by the needs of the target group. For example, Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan, has used flip charts, audio cassettes, and radio programs with great success.

One of the reasons why women's access to education has not resulted in a concomitant change in status is partly because the thrust of our policies has not been to change the relations of production which subsume gender relations, but only to sympathize with the lot of women and to *improve* it with subsidies and other "discriminatory compensation." Such ad hoc solutions provide short-term remedies but fail to diagnose the basic causes. Instead of liberal reformist attitudes, a more radical approach is required so that the gender problem can be tackled not only vis-à-vis its internal dialectic but also within a wider context that would take into account the economic, ideological and political factors and their ramifications on educational policy.

An effective starting point in this project would be to introduce a Women's Studies Centre. How do we define Women's Studies? This is an area of work whose two-fold function is seen as "a means by which women could produce knowledge about themselves, of their own history and condition"

and project that knowledge by means of a "pedagogic practice" (Kuhn and Wolpe, 1978, p. 2). The Women's Studies Centre must be an autonomous entity so that it has "the potential to alter fundamentally the nature of all knowledge by shifting the focus from androcentricity to a frame of reference in which women's different and differing ideas, experiences, needs, and interests are valid in their own right..." (Bowles & Klein, 1983, p. 3).

Courses in Women's Studies must therefore be encouraged because they

- (a) are interdisciplinary; this means for instance that a course on "Women in Indian Society" would require forays into the fields of history, politics, sociology, literature, and so forth;
- (b) provide a fresh perspective;
- (c) can validate academic study by relating its concerns to our contemporary cultural context and the concerns of women in society;
- (d) can lead to consciousness-raising in gender-related issues; and
- (e) prove more accessible to women students who can relate more easily to such courses.

As Kirkup (1988) puts it "the issue of access also relates to delivery systems, with content presented in new ways that will make it more accessible to women, through the way that it is written, with new examples and different perspectives, or through the design of delivery systems, for example scheduling tutorials to take into account family responsibilities (pp. 287-288).

IGNOU can play an interventionist role in the cultural life of the community by instituting a media-monitoring cell that scrutinizes and censors the sexism rampant in mass-media. The subject category "woman" has been artificially structured into stereotypes based on mediations by externalities such as market considerations, consumerism, and control of third world economies, among others. The Women Studies Centre would then introduce specific course structures designed to expose and explode the so-called "feminine mystique" that pervades academic disciplines, mass-media, and other cultural practices. Here the UKOU experience of the course on "The Changing Experience of Women" would provide a useful guideline. But at this point it would be well to remember that the concerns of Indian women, living in a society based on caste, class and gender, must necessarily be different from their Western sisters.

The Women's Studies Centre could further undertake to vet the "he-man" language within our own study materials. A brief glance at the following statements will prove the necessity of such an enterprise: Bååth (1984) suggesting guidelines for the tutor involved in distance education says that the tutor should be able to "individualise *his* tuition...." Mukta Prahlad, presenting a paper at the National Workshop on Women in Distance

Education in India says that the distance learner has the responsibility "to keep *himself* working..." at self-instructional courses (Mani, 1989, p. 55). Clearly women are non-existent as both tutors and learners. To assume that "women" are subsumed under the rubric "men" is to highlight the invisibility of women and the general amnesia in relation to them within patriarchal society. To dismiss the vetting of sexist language as fetishistic hair-splitting is to forget that those who control language control reality. In order to disperse such linguistic androcentricity, it is essential to give this monitoring serious consideration.

The Women's Studies Centre can also explore ways and means whereby more women can be encouraged to join professional courses. One obvious way could be to provide financial incentives in terms of subsidies and scholarships. Another would be to include women in the content of the course on the lines of UKOU's *Women into Management* course. Such courses would not only be *about* women but also *for* women. It would also help to keep specific problems of women in mind while drawing up personal contact schedules. Moreover media can be used effectively to generate awareness among women regarding their rights and options by providing useful role models. In our society, at this point in time, such an exercise is imperative as most women still think within the parameters of their traditional social conditioning. Short optional courses on "Women and Law," "Feminist Historiography," "Women in Politics," "Literary Women," to name a few, could be introduced as part of the overall project of effecting attitudinal change.

Women constitute 41% of the teaching staff at IGNOU: 1 Professor, 4 Readers, 55 Lecturers/Academic Associates. It is clear that this is still not good enough. But the point is not simply the induction of women but the adoption of a feminist perspective that will unravel the ideological assumptions that underlie the production and distribution of knowledge. Faculty development at the university's own Women's Studies Centre and elsewhere can be a step in this direction. IGNOU can indeed effectively engage with the gender question both academically and socially as it has the requisite infrastructure to filter down to the very grassroots. The mention of Women's Studies still generates resistance. It is precisely for this reason that the discipline demands serious consideration and institutional support. With problems like *sati* (forcing a woman to burn alive on the dead husband's funeral pyre), the uncommonly high incidence of bride-burning and allied harassment of women, it becomes all the more important to take on board courses on Women's Studies so that notions of what constitutes a woman's "nature" and a woman's "sphere" are effectively challenged. Sexism is man-made and open to change. It is time to initiate the process.

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