

## **Gender Issues and Indian Textbooks**

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As women's education is a critical focus for any 'welfare state' there has been special provision for the education of women in every five year plan projects in India. Under the constitution of India men and women are equal citizens in the eyes of the law hence having the equal rights to all state resources. But social, economic and cultural dynamics have prevented the law from translating into reality. The present status of girls' enrolment in primary, middle and high school are 44.1, 41.8 and 39.5% respectively. Female literacy stands at 53.7% compared to 76% for men, from the 2001 census report. According to government reports, 45 districts in India mainly in the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand & Orissa have female literacy below 30% according to the claims of Government of India's report.

The policy makers have time to time opened the dialogue and tried to impress upon the state and its people the gravity and the need to address the role of education in gender parity and gender in educational framework. In the 1967-68 the education commission clearly stated in their report- "Full development of our human resources, for improvement of homes and for molding the character during the most impressionable year of infancy the education of women is of even greater importance than that of men. In the modern world the role of women goes much beyond the home and bringing up of children. She is now adopting a career of her own and sharing equally with man, the responsibility for the development of society in all its aspects. This is the direction in which we will have to move."

The National Policy on Education (1986) revised in 1992, recognized the need to redress traditional gender imbalances in educational access and achievement. It recognized that the entire "educational system is alive to the gender and regional dimension of educational disparities" and that there is a need for a "positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women. In their plan of action it was recommended that all Bureaus of the Department of Education would prepare a concrete action plan addressing gender related concerns as well as a monitoring unit would be created in the planning division of the department to ensure integration of gender issues into policy programmes and schemes". It is clearly stated in the Report of the Task Force on education for women's equality, that "It is impossible to achieve universal Elementary Education unless concerted efforts are made to reach out to the girl child".

Among the various intervention programmes planned by Government in 2000, the 86<sup>th</sup> constitutional Amendment Act. made elementary education a Fundamental Right for all children in the age group of 6-14 years. As education is on the concurrent list and hence a responsibility of both the central and state Government, in July 2003, a special thrust on women's education came from the Indian

government through the National Programme of Education for girls at elementary levels (NPEGEL), as a part of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). A budget of over Rs.10 billion has been promised to this scheme. The programme aimed to develop a Model Girl Child Friendly School at the cluster level (10 villages) with incentives to provide uniforms, free textbooks, bridge courses, remedial teaching stationary etc. Another scheme is formulated on behalf of the government the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) to encourage preferentially backward class and caste girls to be in school. Along with these, the total literacy campaigns (TLCS) have given special emphasis to the empowerment of women, ARISE project by NIEPA to mobilize women & community for UEE, Mahila Samakhya or education for women's equality are some of the efforts that are being made by the Governmental as well as non Governmental organizations.

Despite all the efforts made by different organizations and policy makers, the percentage of girls in comparison to boys according to 2002 data in classes I-V is 46.83, in classes VI-VIII 43.93, in classes IX-X 41.44, in classes XI-XII 41.61 and the overall percentage of Girls enrolment from class 1 to XII is 45.31%.

Therefore the issue of gender in the textbook is concerned with only those girls who are lucky enough to enter into the school premise to avail the opportunity to have education with the help of textbooks.

As far as the gender issues in textbooks are concerned the real situation can easily be viewed by some of the examples collected while reviewing textbooks. A five year old is told in his primary textbook that daddy is the king of the family and mummy a caring deputy. It happens to be one of those textbooks of school children that perpetuate inherent gender bias by assigning traditional roles to men and women reinforcing stereotypes. It is an irony that despite a conscious effort on the part of the National Policy on Education (1986), women are still depicted in traditional type casts as cooks, nurses etc.

Amongst the finding of a survey report by Friends for Education, a forum to uplift of education, culture and civic sense, it was found that average primary textbooks in India is about 115-130 pages carry 80-100 illustrations with 52 percent depicting men and boys, 28 percent neutral objects, 14 percent mixed and only 6 percent portrayed girl-children. Women, however, are not only losing on the number front alone as the hardest hit comes when we see the constant association of certain traits with males & females. Men man spaces that are conventionally and socially public & outdoor assignments that project them in stronger roles like engineers, lawyers, professors, pilots, mechanics etc. Girls, in most cases are shown as passive observers where the boys are performing important experiments. Even in the class six mathematics books of primary classes, men dominate in activities representing commercial and marketing situations. Not one woman has been shown as a merchant, executive, engineer or seller. Even in jobs dealing with money like transaction in bank, saving schemes all managed by men. Five Hindi and five English textbooks evaluated by Friends for Education show that men are more adventurous, schematic, aggressive and with a scientific bent of mind. Those kinds

of texts might be responsible for the lack of interest that girls show for science at the secondary and senior secondary levels. As a result, a majority of girls take literary and social science courses thus ending up as weaker sex stereotypes. In fact the truth is that at a subconscious level these texts are preparing boys to achieve in the market place while girls are trained to be submissive and to obey at home. These gender stereotypes may adversely affect even the emotional psyche of children by forcing them to perform a set pattern of behavior pre-determined on the basis of gender discrimination in which boys are taught to associate with outdoor activities and girls are made confined to indoor activities. Resultantly despite 4000 years of contribution to science and technology our children as well as most of us do not know about most pioneering women in technology like Empress Shi Dun, who invented paper, Nor Mahal who invented the device to perform attar distillation to make perfume, Helen Grliner, who runs a robot company in the world, Franklin who photographed the DNA double helical structure, Maria Michell who discovered comet, Vanitha Rangrajan who is the only Indian women to win an Oscar for her technical work on the movie 'Shrek' etc. These and other such names depict the special role of women in the areas which are projected as the prohibited areas for women to show their talent only.

The effect of this discrimination can be very well observed from this event where female teacher of Lavanya, a first grader in Trichy has marked her answer wrong in the class test because instead of writing "Mother stays at home, cooks food and takes care of the family", she wrote "Mother goes to work, earns money and takes care of family". When asked about this, her teacher answered that she cannot do anything as that is not the answer mentioned in the textbooks. The similar case is of a maths teacher of a junior school who admitted that "I would ask if any in the class could solve the problem. When hands go up, I would pick a boy even though some girls would volunteer "this is just an example of the discriminating behavior due to unconscious bias. The effect of all these reasons led to the social perception of disassociation and the perpetuation of myths of incompatibility between women and technology. This results in the continuation of gender insensitive education for the next generation.

Though continuous efforts are being made since last decades for elimination of female stereotypes in the textbooks but the target is yet to be achieved.

NCERT the apex body of primary & secondary education tried to identify areas in language textbooks in the decade of 80s. Some projects and workshops were launched to build up awareness for the elimination of this gender difference but the situation remains more or less the same. Despite the NCERT, having developed a set of guide lines for the elimination of gender stereotyping in textual material and the same disseminated to the authors and publishers, not much has changed. It all began in 1975 after the conference was held to examine the status of women through curriculum. Along with this, NCERT has also set-up a women s' study group that conducts series of evaluations and workshops.

In report of National Focus Group on Gender Issues with special reference to the impact on textbook & curricular constituted by NCERT it was viewed that initiatives to remove sexist biases in the textbooks undertaken in the last decades are played yet again by their limited understanding. Facilitation of role reversals in order to depict equality amongst sexes without any thought to how the very concept of writing accounts of great men's lives needed rethinking. Exceptional women like Rani Jhansi & Madam Curie were still defined by their domestic roles (textbook writers were careful to point out that despite every thing they continued to perform their domestic roles. In the studies of the books in various states, it is found that women are generally portrayed as passive, dutiful and confined to home. Like the peasants and manual laborers, women are shown largely powerless. The curriculum & textbooks served to maintain the status quo in the larger socio-cultural context in the state and despite all efforts to change the traditional meaning of masculine and the feminine, it still continues to persist along with other oppositional dichotomous categories of active-passive, emotional-rational, nature-culture, dependent-autonomous etc. There is still no conceptualization of curriculum informed by an awareness of how gender is positioned within discourses of knowledge production and its relationship to social power essential in addressing these issues.

After going through the pages it can be easily understood that despite all the efforts what the real situation regarding the elimination of gender stereotypes in textbook is. It is good that now the policy makers and Apex bodies related to education like NCERT & CIBE have taken initiative to reform the curriculum. This is a one step forward in the direction of one of the goals agreed at the UN Millennium summit in September 2000, to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005 and in all levels of education by 2015.

The committee for consultation with states for National Curriculum Framework Review set up by NCERT. It is observed that often gender is mistaken as practical category but it actually is a conceptual category, which refers to the ways in which societies distinguish them and assign them social roles. Gender relation is not static, it is a process. The instrumentalist approach adopted so far argues girls education will help in birth control improving family status etc. often fails to understand the need of educating girls as their own right. Now it is essential to integrate it with education. Gender issue has its implication for teacher training also. Therefore teachers have to gather the experiences of gender bias in their life and act accordingly. At present, the reform in curriculum and textbooks are being done very seriously and NCERT the apex body has prepared a 124 page document called National Curriculum Framework 2005 in which slogans like learning without burden and child centered education are being used repeatedly. The NCF (2005) document recognized that "we must use textbooks as one of the primary instruments for equality, since for a great majority of school going children, as also for teachers, it is the only accessible and affordable resource for education". More dramatically, it makes a case for doing away with stereotypes based on gender and caste. This change has been accepted widely and it is believed that a redesigned curriculum will not be imparted through textbooks alone. The teacher will be the one conveying it to

students and however well a text book is written, it should have clear pedagogic methods and the teachers will be trained accordingly. Here are examples of some of the changes that can be viewed after the implementation of NCF (2005) in the area of gender stereotypes in textbooks. ‘Did you know that it was a woman who invented the bullet proof jacket’? Or that the first ‘spiritual leader in history was a woman called Vak, one of several women believed to have written the Vedas’? There are just some of the things school students in the country will learn from the next academic year when the textbooks modeled after the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) are printed. The new textbooks have been designed and written keeping in mind the commitment of NCERT to inculcate gender sensitivity in children from an early age and do away with the gender stereotype. The whole idea behind this is to make students realize that there is no basis for the thinking that women are less competent than men, no matter what the field. It is also decided that the reverse of the cover page of NCERT textbooks will now carry messages underlining the achievements of women in various fields and also how articles in the Indian Constitution prohibited discrimination based on sex and enable the state to implement affirmative discrimination in favor of women.

Despite the reforms proposed in NCF there are reports of various committees that however, women at least appear in most textbooks but reports from most states, point out that gender inequalities and prejudices are perpetuated and the social issues underlying women’s inequality are typically not adequately explained yet. In many privately produced textbooks, the problem is more intense. Thus a moral science guide in Karnataka states that a woman should put up with her husband’s violence in the hope of happiness when her son grows up. The sex segregated curricula in madarassas teach women their domestic roles, while there is no mention of men’s domestic responsibilities.

On the basis of issues raised in the present text it can be said that reforms proposed in NCF (2005) is welcoming but still a lot has to be done to reduce the gender stereotypes in the textbooks. Following are the suggestions which may be helpful in this regards:

- The curricula and textbooks need to be revised especially where the role of female is portrayed only as good house wives. There is a need to include achievements and heroic instances of the female gender in equity to the men.
- Teachers need to undergo gender sensitive course in classroom behavior and interaction with student. Teachers should try gender sensitization technique with their students to correct this misconception. For this teachers have to be trained on these lines.
- It needs to be advertised with the help of textbooks that the human brain is not just any muscle tissue and that causes brain cells to form new connections with each other, the more synaptic transmission the better the thinking process irrespective of gender is.

- Textbooks should go through a gender committee comprising of academics, feminists, historians etc. before issuing them to students to make sure that the textbooks have a gender focus.
- Teachers have to choose those textbooks for children that can help children recognize gender-stereotypical messages. For this, they have to choose those books in which girls/women are portrayed in a positive light with active, dynamic roles as well as in which individuals are portrayed with distinctive personalities irrespective of their gender, the language used in the text is gender free, occupations are represented as gender free, achievement are not evaluated on the basis of gender etc.
- Gender sensitive materials at the primary and secondary levels require inputs from those who have struggled to bring women's voices narrative, experiences and world views into the academic main stream.
- Instead of writing out of superficial thinking about the status of girl child, writers have to feel the real status of girl child in the family in a more empathetic manner.
- The production of textbooks should not be treated as any ordinary activity that can be left to private players or even state governments without any supervision or regulation. Educational materials must be produced within the framework of the constitution and according to processes transparent to public.
- A National Textbook Council as suggested by CAGE Committee should be set up to monitor textbooks.

We all accept that textbooks play a significant role in transmitting a society's culture to children and gender roles an important aspect of the culture. How gender is portrayed in books thus contributes to the image children develop of their own role and that of their gender in society. Therefore it must be taken into consideration with full accountability while producing textbooks for the future citizens of globe.

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