WOMEN'S STUDIES IN INDIA

EDITED BY MARY E. JOHN

A READER

(v) DGE&T office should have a separate Directorate of Women's Vocational Training.

(vi) Women's access to technical education will be improved qualitatively and quantitatively. The choice of trades/disciplines offered to women at Certificate/Diploma/Degree levels in all types of technical education institutions will be made keeping in view the objective of bringing about women's equality. Necessary incentives, as spelt out in the section of Technical Education, will be provided.

Management structure at centre and state level

19. The interventions and programmes referred to above will be planned, coordinated, monitored and evaluated continuously both at the national and state level. Each of the organisations responsible for the programme will have to be strengthened. The Women's Cell in the NCERT will be revived and strengthened. NIEPA and Directorate of Adult Education will have strong cells to plan and administer women's training programmes. The Women's Cell in the UGC will be strengthened in order to monitor the implementation of various programmes at higher education level.
20. At the state level, Women's Cells should be set up in all the states with adequate supporting staff to be headed by an officer of at least joint director's status.

THE STORY OF MY SANSKRIT

Kumud Pawde

A lot of things are often said about me to my face. I've grown used to listening to them quietly; it's become a habit. What I have to listen to is praise. Actually, I don't at all like listening to praise. You may say that this itself is a form of self-indulgence. But that isn't so. I mean it sincerely. When I hear myself praised, it's like being stung by a lot of gadflies. As a result, I look askance at the person praising me. This expression must look like annoyance at being praised, for many misunderstandings have arisen about me in this connection. But it can't be helped. My acquaintances get angry with me because I am unable to accept compliments gracefully. I appear ill-mannered to them, because there isn't in me the courtesy they are expecting.

Now if you want to know why I am praised—well, it's for my knowledge of Sanskrit, my ability to learn it and to teach it. Doesn't anyone ever learn

Sanskrit? That's not the point. The point is that Sanskrit and the social group I come from don't go together in the Indian mind. Against the background of my caste, the Sanskrit I have learned appears shockingly strange.

That a woman from a caste that is the lowest of the low should learn Sanskrit, and not only that, also teach it—is a dreadful anomaly to a traditional mind. And an individual in whose personality these anomalies are accumulated becomes an object of attraction—an attraction blended of mixed acceptance and rejection. The attraction based on acceptance comes from my caste-fellows, in the admiration of whose glance is pride in an impossible ahcievement. That which for so many centuries was not to be touched by us, is now within our grasp. That which remained encased in the shell of difficulty, is now accessible. Seeing this knowledge hidden in the esoteric inner sanctum come within the embrace, not just of any person, but one whom religion has considered to be vermin—that is their victory.

The other attraction—based on rejection—is devastating. It pricks holes in one's mind—turning a sensitive heart into a sieve. Words of praise of this kind, for someone who is aware, are like hot spears. It is fulsome praise. Words that come out from lips' edge as filthy as betel-stained spit. Each word gleaming smooth as cream. Made up of the fragility of a honey-filled shirish-blossom. Polished as marble. The sensation is that of walking on a soft velvety carpet—but being burnt by the hot embers hidden in someone's breast, and feeling the scorching pain in one's soul. The one who's speaking thinks the listener can't understand—for surely a low caste person hasn't the ability to comprehend. But some people intend to be understood, so that I'll be crushed by the words. 'Well, isn't that amazing! So you're teaching Sanksrit at the Government College, are you? That's very gratifying, I must say.' The words are quite ordinary; their literal meaning is straightforward. But the meaning conveyed by the tone in which they are said torments me in many different ways! 'In what former life have I committed a sin that I should have to learn Sanskrit even from you? All our sacred scriptures have been polluted.' Some despair is also conveyed by their facial expressions. 'It's all over! Kaliyug has dawned. After all, they're the government's favourite sons-in-law! We have to accept it all.'

There are some other people I know, who have a genuine regard for me. They are honestly amazed by how I talk, by my clean, clear pronunciation. They speak with affectionate admiration about my mode of living. The food I cook is equated with ambrosia. They detect a brahminical standard of culture in my every thought and action—enough to surprise them. They constantly try to reconcile the contradiction. It's my good luck that I'm not always being asked to account for my antecedents. The main point is that they are trying to understand my evident good breeding in the context of my caste, and that is what makes everything so novel for them.

The result is that although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to

forget. And then I remember an expression I heard somewhere: 'What comes by birth, but can't be cast off by dying—that is caste.'

Beyond the accepters and the rejecters lies yet another group. In wholeheartedly welcoming the admiration of this group, every corner of my being is filled with pleasure. This group consists of my students. Far removed from hostile feelings. Without even an iota of caste consciousness. Away from the prejudices of their elders. Pure, innocent admiration, prompted by the boundless respect they feel, fills their eyes. Actually these girls have reached the age of understanding. The opinions they hear around them should by rights have made an impression on their minds. But these precious girls are full to the brim with the ability to discriminate impartially. And they keep their admiration within the limits of their gaze; they do not allow it to reach their lips. And that's why I yearn for that admiration. The occasional forward girl who has suppressed her timidity makes bold to express her feelings. 'Madam, I wish your lesson would never end!' And I answer her woodenly, 'But the college doesn't feel that way.' She feels snubbed, but I don't wish to encourage her admiration, in case it becomes a habit.

If the admiration had stayed limited to this individual level, I would tolerate it, but it goes beyond the prescribed boundaries. In other words, it starts to be blazoned even at the official level. As usual they start beating the drum of my caste, and tunes of praise of my knowledge of Sanskrit begin to mingle with the drumbeat. In 1971, the Maharashtra state government arranged, at Nagpur, a felicitation meeting to honour scholars of the Vedas. According to the wishes of the honourable ex-minister of education, Shri Madhukarrao Chaudhary, I was to introduce these honoured scholars. The introduction was to be made in Sanskrit. 'In the time of the Aryans it was noted down, and moreover impressed on the minds of the common Indian people, from the Himalayas to the tip of the peninsula, that my ancestors should consider themselves guilty of a crime if they even heard the sound of this language. And that is the language in which I have to speak.'

My God! How I was I going to manage? My heart began to beat rapidly. My mind was dark with anxiety, and I was drowned in feelings of inferiority. A conflict of emotions—and once again a confrontation with public praise. 'Whereas our traditional books have forbidden the study of Sanskrit by women and Shudras, a woman from those very Shudras, from the lowest caste among them, will today, in Sanskrit, introduce these scholars. This is the beginning of a progressive way of thinking in independent India.' A thunder of applause. I look towards the sound of the applause. Most of the people here are from government offices. Looking at them through an artist's eyes, I see what looks like a wild disco dance of different emotions. The frustration of the defeated, the fury of the traditionalists, the respect of some acquaintances, the hostility and disgust of others, are obvious to my experienced eye. Some gazes ask me, 'Why did you need to make the introductions in this manner? To humiliate us?'

In response to these hissings of wounded pride, I experience a mixture of emotions. Seeing this hostility and disgust, I slip into the past. This disgust is extremely familiar to me. In fact, that is what I have grown accustomed to, ever since I was old enough to understand. Actually, I shouldn't have any feelings about this disgust, and if I do have any feelings at all, they should be of gratitude. For it was this disgust that inclined me towards Sanskrit. It so happened that the ghetto in which there stood my place of birth, the house where I was welcome, was encircled on all sides by the houses of caste Hindus. The people in our ghetto referred to them as the Splendid People. A small girl like me, seven or eight years old, could not understand why they called them 'Splendid'. And even as today's mature female with learning from innumerable books, I still cannot understand it. That is, I have understood the literal meaning of the word 'splendid', but not why it should be applied to them,whether they deserve to have it applied. The girls who studied along with me were brahmins or from other higher castes. I had to pass their houses. I paused, waiting casually for their company. Right in front of me, the mothers would warn their daughters, 'Be careful! Don't touch her. Stay away from her. And don't play with her. Or I won't let you into the house again.' Those so-called educated, civilized mothers were probably unconscious of the effect of this on my young mind. It wasn't as if I could not understand them.

Every day, I bathed myself clean with Pears soap. My mother rubbed Kaminia oil on my hair, and plaited it neatly. My clothes were well-washed and sparkling clean. The girls of my own caste liked to play with me because it enabled them to smell some fragrance. For my father himself was fond of toiletries. So there was always a variety of oils, soaps and perfumes in the house. The other girls in my class (except for those who lived near my ghetto) also liked to sit next to me. So why should these women have talked like that?

What's more, if one were to compare houses, our house was cleaner than theirs. My mother daily smeared the floor with fresh cowdung. The white-powder borders were delicately drawn. The courtyard was well-sprinkled, and decorated with rangoli designs. Almost every fortnight, on the occasion of a festival, the house was whitewashed from top to bottom. Every scrap of cloth was boiled in a solution of soda bicarb before it was washed. The metal vessels were scrubbed to gleaming. On the other hand, one could see water stains and a greasy film on even the drinking-vessels those girls had. In fact, it was I who didn't like to sit next to those girls. For, from my childhood, my sense of smell, in particular, had sharpened beyond limit. Though, of course, the nose that conveyed it was broad and misshapen. The sour smell, like buttermilk, that rose from the bodies of those girls! I couldn't bear the smell of shikakai mixed with the smell of their hair. Their bad breath, too, was unbearable. And, in spite of all this, they found me disgusting? So, even at that young age, this emotion of disgust taught me to think. It inspired me

to be introspective. At an age which was meant for playing and skipping around, these thoughts would rouse me to fury.

One event outraged my self-respect. There was to be a thread-ceremony for the brother of one of my classmates. I had not actually been invited but my restless curiosity would not let me sit quiet. I stood outside the pandal looking in at the ceremony going on inside. The sacrificial fire was lit; the air all around was filled with the smoke and fragrance of incense and the grain burnt-offering. The reverberations of the Vedic chants threatened to burst through the cloth walls of the pandal. I was lost in watching the head movements that accompanied the chant of 'Svaha!' each time a libation was poured. All this was extremely new, unknown, never seen before. I was totally engrossed, at one with the chants and the incense.

My concentration was suddenly broken. One voice: 'Hey, girl! What are you staring at? Can you make head or tail of it? Here, take a sweet—and be off!' A decked-up woman past her prime, dripping with gold and pearls, stood in front of me, adjusting her heavily brocaded sari. Her nose was wrinkled in disgust, like a shrivelled fig. 'What do you take me for—a beggar? Giving me a sweet! Can you see injuries on anyone just because I watched them?' I retorted, and briskly walked away.

Words followed me: 'These Mahars have really got above themselves.' The intonation was the typical superior nasal tone of the Pune brahmin.

My young mind thought, 'Why was I so wrapped up in watching? What had that ceremony to do with me? And why should that woman behave so bitchily with me?' There was definitely some intimate connection between me and those Vedic mantras. Otherwise why should that woman have noticed my innocent absorption? Why should she have taunted me disgustedly? She must have been unwilling to let those chants enter my ears. I used to ask my father, 'What language are the Vedic mantras composed in?' He used to say, 'They're in Sanskrit, my girl.' 'Is Sanskrit very difficult? Can't we learn it?' My father used to answer, 'Why shouldn't we? After all, we're independent now. Those days are gone. Learn Sanskrit. Don't I too know the Gayatri Mantra?' And he used to say 'Om' and begin to recite the Gayatri mantra. In simple delight, I used to tell my neighbours, 'I'm going to learn Sanskrit.' The educated people next door used to poke fun at me. 'Is Sanskrit such an easy language? It's very difficult. Did our forefathers ever learn it?' Hearing this, I would be discouraged. Seeing my crestfallen face, my father would start cursing those people, sometimes obscenely, sometimes more elegantly. He used to encourage me, and the encouragement would make me glow with confidence once again.

After I entered high school, I took Sanskrit as an elective subject in class nine. The school where I went supported brahminical prejudices. All sorts of indirect efforts were systematically made to prevent me from learning Sanskrit. 'You won't be able to manage. There will be no one at home to help you. Sanskrit is very difficult,' etc., etc. But I was as firm as a rock. Seeing that no form of persuasion had any effect on me, the persuaders stopped persuading. But how to remove the prejudice in their minds? I did not want to pay heed to every single opinion. I just wanted to keep my teacher, Hatekar, happy. He had been full of praise of me since I was in class six. 'How can this little slip of a girl give answers so fast in every subject?' I asked him, 'Sir, I should take Sanskrit, shouldn't I?' 'Do take it. But you've taken all the Arts subjects, though you're good at maths. Take science and maths, along with Sanskrit.' 'But sir, I don't enjoy maths.'

'But you can become a doctor, can't you?' 'I don't want to be a doctor. I can't bear suffering.' He laughed and said, 'On the contrary, it is precisely those who can't bear suffering, who are fit to become doctors. Won't you be able to help the afflicted? That's what's needed among your people. But it's your decision.'

With great eagerness and interest, I began my study of Sanskrit. As I learnt the first-declension masculine form of the word 'deva', I picked up the rhythm of the chant. I must make special mention of the person who helped me to learn by rote the first lesson about aspirates—my teacher Gokhale. If I omit to do so, I shall feel a twinge of disloyalty in every drop of my blood. Gokhale Guruji. Dhoti, long-sleeved shirt, black cap, a sandalwood-paste mark on his forehead. The typical robust and clear pronunciation of the Vedic school. And an incredible concern for getting his students to learn Sanskrit. At first I was afraid. But this proved groundless. What actually happened was the very opposite of what I had expected.

But there were many obstacles. Against them all, I at last matriculated. On seeing the marks I got for Sanskrit, I announced, 'I shall do an M.A. in Sanskrit.' Our enlightened neighbours laughed as they had before. Some college lecturers and lawyers also joined in the joke. 'How can that be possible? You may have got good marks at Matric. But it isn't so easy to do an M.A. in Sanskrit. You shouldn't make meaningless boasts; you should know your limitations.' The discouragers said what they usually do. The point was that the people who discouraged me were all of my caste. But their words could not turn me from my purpose. I didn't reply—I wanted to answer them by action. For that, I needed to study very hard. In order to take an M.A. in Sanskrit, I would have to go to the famous Morris College. I had heard so many things about the college from my friend's sister. About the learned professors with their cultivated tastes, about the mischievous male students, the beautiful girls, and the huge library. My interest was limited to the professors who would teach me, and to the library. And I joined the college.

The Hindus from the high-caste areas used to taunt me. 'Even these wretched outcastes are giving themselves airs these days—studying in colleges.' I pretended to be deaf. I had begun to have some idea of what Savitribai

Phule must have had to endure on account of her husband Mahatma Jhotiba Phule's zeal for women's education.

I went through some mixed experiences while I studied. I would call my lecturers' even-handed fairness a very remarkable thing. I was never scared by the prejudice of which repute and rumour had told me. What is more, praise and encouragement were given according to merit. Some people may have felt dislike in their heart of hearts, but they never displayed it. One thing alone irked me—the ironical comments about the scholarship I got. 'She's having fun and games at the expense of a scholarship. Just bloated with government money!' From the peons themselves to the senior officials, there was the same attitude. I couldn't understand. Was it charity they were dispensing from their personal coffers? They were giving me government money, and if that money was going from them to the government in the form of taxes, then equally, a tax was being levied on the public to pay their salaries. And that tax was collected in indirect forms even from the parents of the scholarship holders. So who paid whom? When the Dakshina Prize Committee used to give stipends, there was no complaint of any kind from any level of society. Then why now? Oh, well . . . So now, the story of my M.A.

In the second year of our M.A., we went to the postgraduate department in the university. Very well-known scholars taught us there. The head of the department was a scholar of all-India repute. He didn't like my learning Sanskrit, and would make it clear that he didn't. And he took a malicious delight in doing so. The sharp claws of his taunts left my mind wounded and bleeding. In a way, I had developed a terror of this great pandit. His manner of speaking was honeyed and reasonable, but filled with venom. I would unconsciously compare him with Gokhale Guruji. I couldn't understand why this great man with a doctorate, so renowned all over India, this man in his modern dress, who did not wear the traditional cap, who could so eloquently delineate the philosophy of the Universal Being, and with such ease explain difficult concepts in simple terms, could not practise in real life the philosophy in the books he taught. This man had been exposed to modernity; Gokhale Guruji was orthodox. Yet one had been shrivelled by tradition, the other enriched by it, like a tree weighed down with fruit. Days go by; you survive calamities; but the memory of them sets up its permanent abode in you. In the inmost recesses of your inner being. I survived even through such a difficult ordeal. I got my M.A. with distinction . . .

And now I would be a lecturer in Sanskrit! My dreams were tinted with turquoise and edged in gold. The images I nursed about myself were taking strange shapes in my mind. A high-paid job would come to me on a platter from the government. For I must have been the first woman from a scheduled caste to pass with distinction in Sanskrit. Every nook and cranny of my mind was filled with such hopes and expectations. But those ideas were

shattered. My illusions proved as worthless as chaff. I became despondent about the efficiency of the government. I started attending interviews in private colleges. And that was a complete farce. Some said, 'But how will you stay on with us, when you've passed so well?' (In other words, they must have wanted to say, 'How will you work for less pay?') In other places, the moment I had been interviewed and stepped out of the room, there would be a burst of derisive laughter. I would hear words like sharp needles. 'So now even these people are to teach Sanskrit! Government brahmins, aren't they?' And the ones who said this weren't even brahmins, but so-called reformers from the lower castes, who considered themselves anti-brahmin, and talked of the heritage of Jyotiba Phule, and flogged the mass of the lower castes for their narrow caste consciousness. And yet they found it distasteful that a girl from the mahar caste, which was one of the lower castes, should teach Sanskrit. When people like these, wearing hypocritical masks, are in responsible positions in society, it does not take even a minute for that society to fall.

Two years after my M.A., I was still unemployed. There must be many whose position is the same as mine. In my frustration I took a bold step to get out of the trap. I presented my case in writing to the Honourable Shri Jagjivan Ram, the noted minister in the central cabinet. I condemned the flimsy pretence of the state government and the administration that flouted the Constitution. My words had all the power of a sharp sword. For they were a cry from the heart of a person being crushed to death under the wheels of circumstance.

The Honourable Minister Jagjivan Ram placed the letter before Pandit Nehru, who was astonished by it, and sent me an award of Rs. 250/-, telling me to meet the chief minister of Maharashtra. Accordingly the chief minister of that time, Yeshwantrao Chavan, sent me a telegram asking me to meet him. Within a day or two, one wire after another had electrified me into wondering who I'd suddenly become. Getting past the ranks of spearmen and macebearers at the government office was quite an ordeal. But finally I got to see the 'Saheb'. Now, I thought, I would get a job at once—as a clerk in the government office, at least. A naive expectation. The chief minister made me fulsome promises in his own style. 'We'll definitely make efforts for you—but you won't get a job in minutes; it'll take us some time. We'll have to give thought to it; have to hunt out something.' And with this assurance came a fine speech that qualified as an example of literature. 'A student of Sanskrit is intoxicated with idealism. It is a deeply felt personal desire. You shouldn't run after a job. Involve yourself in research. Pursue your studies.' Now the controls of endurance that restrained me started to break rapidly, and the words that had been bound within me broke out. 'Saheb, if you can't give me a job, tell me so, clearly. I don't want promises. Promises keep false hopes alive. Research is the fruit of mental peace. How do you expect me to have mental peace, when I am starving? And I'm tired of speeches.' I was fed up with life. Otherwise in AD 1960 it would have been impossible for a wretch

like me even to stand before a dignitary like this, with all the power of *kartumakartumanyathankartum*, (to do, omit to do, or do in another way), let alone speak out to him.

Waiting for a job, I passed the first year of an M.A. in English Literature. It was just an excuse to keep myself occupied. That year I got married—an inter-caste marriage. That is a story by itself—a different glimpse of the nature of Indian society. Let that be the subject of another story. The surprising thing is that two months after my marriage, I got an assistant lecturership in a government college. The deputy director who was on the interview board was amazed. 'How did this girl remain unemployed for two years?' Today, I am a professor in the famous college where I studied, whose very walls are imbued with the respect I felt for that institution. But one thought still pricks me: the credit for Kumud Somkuwar's job is not hers, but that of the name Kumud Pawde. I hear that a woman's surname changes to match her husband's—and so does her caste. That's why I say that the credit of being a professor of Sanskrit is that of the presumed higher caste status of Mrs Kumud Pawde. The caste of her maiden status remains deprived.

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GENDER INEQUALITY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLING IN INDIA: THE HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE

Karuna Chanana

Introduction

In recent times, gender as a principle underlying the distribution of resources and entitlements within the household and society, namely, education, economic rights, health care, and political participation, has become crucial in educational discourse due to the linkages of education with indicators of development.

It is now generally accepted that education, as a source of social mobility, equality and empowerment, both at the individual and at the collective level, is imperative for women, who constitute half of human kind, if societies have to develop in any meaningful way.

It is a widely known fact that, compared to men, Indian women have lower literacy rates, lower enrolment rates and higher non-enrolment and drop-out rates. Although the education system has expanded rapidly since India achieved independence in 1947, the gender gap continues to be substantial. In other words, women who constitute less than half the Indian population are deprived of the right to education, information, knowledge, skills and thinking associated with formal education.