

Towards Freedom and Equality: Women's Education in India

Krishna Menon

Abstract

South Asia has been a contentious site of knowledge production. Caste, gender, tribe, ethnicity, language and religion in addition to class, sexuality and disability are factors that have determined what is considered knowledge – its access as well as dissemination. This paper focuses on the site of higher education in India and engages with a series of marginalities that have been produced and contested, both in terms of access to knowledge as well as what is considered knowledge. It examines the contestations over exclusions based on caste, gender and sexuality within classrooms, educational institutions, and creation of the response of the law. The paper examines the attempts made by 'women' to breach this bastion more often than not through women's only education institutions. Using history of modern education for women in the region, the paper explores if these spaces challenge conceptions of women's role in a traditional society? Or is it a merely token, or worse still does it reinforce the existing understanding about women's role in an unequal society? Do these institutions extend the surveillance and control of female sexuality and agency that are so typical of the role of families in the South Asia? This would provide a backdrop for an evaluation of the role played by women's studies as an academic discipline in this region and the possibility of resistance emerging from the women's studies centres.

Author Profile

Krishna Menon is Professor of Gender Studies and Dean, School of Human Studies, Ambedkar University Delhi.

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Introduction

A series of exclusions have characterized the landscape of education in India, especially so with reference to higher education. The nature of this exclusion has been along the lines of caste and gender to a great extent. In order to address this and other similar exclusions the Constitution of independent India, incorporated special provisions for backward castes and groups, while also affirming the universal right to equality.

Women's education is part of the overall commitment to the democratic values enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution of India that seeks equality, liberty, justice and fraternity. Setting up educational institutions to address women's educational needs is one such initiative which would obviously include measures such as scholarships for women, extension of the time frame for completion of various degrees and of course the availability of hostel facilities to name but a few.

This paper will begin with a very brief survey of the history of modern education for women in India, and its role in challenging dominant perceptions of gender and power in South Asian societies. Do these spaces challenge conceptions of women's role in a traditional society? Or is it merely a token, or worse still does it reinforce the existing understanding about women's role in an unequal society? Do these institutions extend the surveillance and control of female sexuality and agency that are so typical of the role of families in the South Asian context?

Mothers of India – Education for Women

The history of women's education in modern India is diverse and uneven. British India had a different trajectory than the Indian states and various regions also engaged with this question differently. So it is very difficult to write a uniform account of women's education in India. Travancore state ruled by the Travancore royal family, in south west India pioneered modern education funded totally by the state as early as 1817.

The venerable Bethune College for Women in Calcutta Presidency is perhaps the oldest women's college in Asia, established in 1879 by John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune as a result of his pioneering vision of producing 'better wives and better mothers in their homes' with the help of education. It has successfully enlightened generations of women to such a degree that they have emerged as triumphant empowered individuals in both home and the world. (Bethune College)

Queen Mary's College in the Madras presidency in South India has been in the forefront of the education of women ever since July 1914, when the Government of Madras instituted the Madras Women's College. An education in Queen Mary's College was much sought after by parents of young women and families of high social standing. (Queen Mary's College)

The SNDT Women's University is the first women's university in India as well as in South-East Asia. The University was founded by Maharishi Dr. Dhondo Keshav Karve in 1916, inspired by the cause of women's education. The first five women graduated in 1921 from this university.

Indraprastha College for Women in Delhi was founded in 1924 and is the oldest women's college of the University of Delhi. The parent school and the College both grew out of the efforts of a group of Philanthropists associated with the Theosophical Society of India. They were inspired by Mrs. Annie Besant, also a theosophist, who believed in and promoted education for women in north India, at a time when women were confined to the home and realized their destiny in marriage and motherhood. This college has intersected the National Movement, the Education Reforms Movement, and the Women's Movement, and is today considered to be a landmark in the history of the autonomous women's movement in post-independence India. It was at the centre of the women's movement in India at its peak in the late 70s and early 80s.

It is evident that women's educational institutions of higher learning have a fairly long history in India and compares rather favourably to the western world. Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (now Mount Holyoke College) in the USA was established for instance in 1837. The first women's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge were founded in the 1860s and 70s, around the same time as when Savitribai Phule set up the first girls' school in western India and began to teach at the school. She was one of first women teachers in India, opened two schools for girls and women from all castes by the mid nineteenth century in western India.

Education, as Andre Beteille has suggested in his landmark essay titled *Equality and Universality*, was expected to play the role of a strong catalyst in the process of ushering democracy and equality into a society that was hierarchical and unequal. Beteille makes a pertinent distinction between a hierarchical society where inequalities are approved and accepted and where individual mobility is rather difficult and not permitted and an egalitarian model on the other hand that allows for individual liberty, albeit not very easily. Indian society is struggling to move from being a hierarchical society to a largely egalitarian one. (Tilak 2013, 21-36) Beteille goes on to argue that caste and gender-based hierarchies seemed the most odious and it was hoped that the new Constitution with its commitment to a democratic framework would tackle such hierarchies.

Colonialism and the nationalist response to it prompted among many other things a close re-examination of womanhood in India. A new Indian woman to fit into the requirements of the nationalist discourse had to be fashioned. Post-independence India has continued with the assumption that a strong nation requires strong and enlightened mothers and wives "If you educate a man you educate an individual, however, if you educate a woman you educate a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered" said Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first Prime Minister.

Swami Vivekananda, a leading figure in the pre independence Social reform period, warned against discrimination between sexes. There is no sex distinction in Atman (soul) – 'the soul has neither sex, nor caste nor imperfection.' He argued that the western model of womanhood that was the premise of western education was based on the ideals of wifhood, whereas the Indian model should premise its educational principles for women on the ideals of motherhood.

He visited England in 1895 and met Margaret Elizabeth an Irish lady. Influenced by Swami Vivekananda's teaching Margaret became the first western woman to be a Sanyasini and was named Bhagini Nivedita. Nivedita played a major role in promoting the rights of women in rural India. In November 1889, she started a school for girls, allowing them basic education. The school is today known as Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Sister Nivedita girl's school. At The curriculum for women, at the school, transacted in the mother tongue, consisted of moral value, literature and Sanskrit grammar, craft and cooking, home science along with Yoga, worship, and meditation.

Gandhi advocated a different curriculum for women. Although he believed that men and women are of equal rank, he did not consider them identical. In framing any scheme of women's education this cardinal truth therefore he argued, must be constantly kept in mind. Gandhi suggested that man is supreme in the 'outwards activities' of a married pair and, women in domestic affairs. In the upbringing and education of children, women ought to have more knowledge. At the same time, he argued that knowledge should be divided into watertight compartments. Gandhi was firmly of the opinion that women must be educated in Indian language and did not need to study English. (Gandhi 1947)

Women's education has often been projected as the means to build a strong nation. In the context of colonialism and the nationalist responses, an extension of the need for creating a strong nation of strong mothers. Women's education was seen as a means through which to build strong women who could shoulder the responsibility of nation-building. The nature of that responsibility however, remained very gendered. In keeping with the theme of this project, it is clear that this avenue succeeded in not just producing ideal women subjects who would embody virtuous Indian motherhood, but also taught women to transgress and transform their lives. The process and this journey have however not been easy.

The Pursuit of Equality – Role of Women's Education

Many government-led initiatives and policies have paved the way for women's education in independent India, and there has been a common thread linking these efforts that acknowledge the transformative potential of women's education. One of the earliest such bodies was the University Education Commission of 1948. The Commission began by stating that the greatest profession of women is and would probably continue to be that of home makers. "Sometimes there is a period before marriage in which a young woman can do useful work such as teaching or nursing. Sometimes, the loss of a husband makes her the bread winner of the family." The University Education Commission was told by the principal of a college that the standard education was of no use to women as they were not equipped to deal with the practical aspects of life of becoming a wife, mother etc.

We would argue, however, that this space of women's education has performed two very different roles i.e. create empowering feminist spaces as well as reinforce patriarchal stereotypes. These almost contrarian expectations from women's education continue to haunt this arena even today. Prime Minister Nehru speaking at a women's college in the University of Delhi, in 1950 said, "Women's education is important for making better homes, better family and better society" Nehru goes on to say "women are chiefly responsible for running the home and should know how to do this in an orderly and aesthetic way". (Banerjee 1998)

After independence, the most important development in the field of women's education was the setting up of a National Committee on Women's Education 1958, under the chairmanship of Durga Bai Deshmukh which examined this question very comprehensively. (Agrawal 1994) A few other significant committees were set up to examine the curriculum for women students under the leadership of Hansa Mehta in 1961. The Bhaktavatsalam Committee was set up in 1965 to examine the impact of lack of public support on women's education especially in rural India. The seminal report of the National Committee on Status of Women in India (CSWI) titled *Towards Equality* came out in 1974 and the National Policy on Education in 1986 that followed was infused with the findings of this committee.

The iconic *Towards Equality Report* gave a new direction to thinking about women's education. The Report was placed before the Indian parliament in 1975. It examined the constitutional, legal and administrative provisions which had a bearing on the status of women and noted with concern the dismal scenario of women's education. The committee recommended co-education as a longterm policy in view of the economic constraints and equality of opportunity. Separate institutions for girls were however recommended in areas where there was continued sex segregation. Mixed staffing was recommended for co-educational schools to draw more girls. For universalization of education, the committee recommended, inter-alia: provision of primary schools within walking distance from the home of every child; sustained mobilization of public opinion and community support for creating a favorable climate for girls' education. Several other suggestions were made: Special incentives to be given to girls in areas of low female enrolment of girls; at least 50% of the teachers at the elementary stage should be women; a system of part-time education for girls who are unable to attend school on a full-time basis should be made. The CSWI recommended a common course of education for both boys and girls till the end of class tenth, all courses being open to both sexes after that and urged that special emphasis be placed on the removal of disparities and to equalize educational opportunity by attending to the specific needs of those who have been denied equality so far. (Mazumdar 2011).

This spirit of education for equality resulted in the formulation of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1986. It began from the premise that education is for all. At the primary stage the committee suggested that needle work, music and dancing should be taught to both boys and girls. It recognized the fact that education not only "furthers goals of socialism, secularism, and democracy enshrined in 'our' Constitution" but also "develops manpower for different levels of the economy", which in turn guarantees "national self-reliance". Thus, a clear connection was established between India's development goals and the development of requisite human resources which required equal opportunity to be provided to all as far as education was concerned.

The NPE is best known for its section on "Education for Equality". The section starts with the promise that 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." The policy also promised that the "national educational system will play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women". Women's Studies entered the academia formally at this point. A new vocabulary came to be used to describe the need for women's education as that of empowerment and equality, far removed from the earlier focus on ideal women citizens and mothers. The resonance of the

powerful autonomous women's movement that swept across India in the late 1970s and 1980s can be heard distinctly in the new policy articulation.

Women's studies as an academic area of understanding was introduced. Women's studies centers in universities, and a chain of women's development cells were instantiated in colleges. The first WDC (Women's Development Cell) to be set up at any college was at Lady Shri Ram College in New Delhi. The idea was to look at roles that women could play beyond the prescribed roles. The Cell gave young women a platform beyond the confined spaces.

Women's colleges in many cases rose to the occasion, offered an ideal space for a new generation of young women to be initiated into the dialogue on equality. They were willing and enthusiastic partners in the women's movement that was unfolding largely around the issues of violence against women, livelihood and other economic issues. The Mahila Samakhya was launched in April 1988 as an intervention for substantive equality. (MHRD n.d.)

Most of the government reports emphasized upon the need to facilitate women's education by increasing number of women's educational institutions, greater number of women teachers, more mechanisms to maintain standards and additional facilities like mentoring and hostel. By the end of the 1980s decade, there was a consolidation of the gains of the autonomous women's movement and a very deep and wide sharing of the struggles and ideals of the women's movement and women's colleges, more so in the bigger cities of India. The heady 80s were soon followed by new challenges that came in the way of the women's movement – challenges from Dalit feminists, women belonging to minority religious groups, women with disabilities, queer and lesbian groups, women from conflict zones such as Kashmir and the north east and sex workers. Each of these challenges succeeded in pushing the women's movement further in more radical and creative directions. Thus, typically the nature of feminist politics in India has been one where the toughest challenges and questions have come from within the movement and this perhaps gives the movement a special energy and vitality.

The unruly daughters of India

The tabling of the Mandal Commission Report in the early 1990s by the then Prime Minister, Vishwanath Pratap Singh and its gradual impact on the higher education landscape profoundly changed the terms of discourse in academia, student politics and feminist groups on campuses. Much of the sharpest resistance came from young female students across India's leading campuses – they seemed to have effortlessly made the connection between patriarchy at home and the regimes of domination and surveillance in the universities and hostels with the intervening public spaces like the roads, parks and public transport being complicit in this regime. These women students correctly established the linkage between a hyper nationalist agenda and deep-seated misogyny. These young women drew the lines to join the dots of casual misogyny, surveillance by the family and the university and hostels, street harassment and horrific acts of violence.

The other significant development in the 1990s was the consolidation of Hindu upper caste middle and lower middle classes in north India around an aggressive nationalism emerging out of a Hindu nationalist framework. This section felt increasingly besieged by the democratic

assertions of tribal and peasant groups, environmental and women's movements and Dalit and other backward class (OBC) groups during the 1980s and 1990s. Simultaneously, India experienced large scale economic and cultural transformation due to the restructuring and opening up of the Indian economy. While the bounties of globalization were welcomed, the identity eroding consequences were resisted. In other words, economic opportunities and changes that threatened to erode traditional privileges based on caste, community and gender created a backlash and resistance.

The onus of upholding and honouring the traditions came to rest on the shoulders of Hindu upper caste women who in a sense are, as Uma Chakravarty has characterized, 'the gateway' to breaking caste barriers. (Chakravarti 2003) It is the upper caste women and their sexuality that actually regulates the entire edifice of caste in India to a very great extent. Marriage within the caste and sexual relations only within the caste are needed to ensure the 'purity' of the caste and its continuity. Upper caste women entering into sexual alliances with men from lower castes would sully the purity of the caste and disrupt the continuation of the social structure in established ways. Hence, the severest restrictions, and penalties in addition to ideological and cultural barriers exist to regulate, control and keep under surveillance the sexual purity of women in general within the codified caste system, but more so the lives of the upper caste women.

While, young women are expected to contribute to the national economy and to nation-building through their labour and education on the one hand, on the other hand they need to take care not to violate traditional familial, sexual and social norms. What is the role of women's education in this context? What is the role specifically of feminist pedagogy? Can it effectively transform young women's lives? These and similar concerns motivated this inquiry.

Gender and Caste are the two place holders of Indian society and the two are interlinked as demonstrated by Uma Chakravarti (2003) and V. Geetha (2002) and many others. This insight can be traced to the observations of Jotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule, Periyar and B R Ambedkar. Women across India are challenging these intricately laid rules of who can have sex with whom, who can marry whom and so on. Sexual relations outside of the institution of marriage, relationships that are inter caste or across communities and race are frowned upon at the very least and result in brutal killing and violence at the other end.

Unregulated sexual intimacy is feared because of the disruption it might cause in Indian society, and is often attributed to an international conspiracy in the case of Hindu women marrying Muslim men. These instances are attributed to the growth of radical Islam and rather crudely termed 'love jihad' – a kind of war like situation. (Devika 2017)

The terrain of this war is the mind and the body of the 'vulnerable' and unsuspecting Hindu girl, the ammunition is the hypermasculine and excessively virile Muslim men. This anxiety with regard to unregulated sexuality and intimacy has resulted in a series of repressive measures that seek to control women within the families and the community but very significantly even within the supposedly liberating space of higher education. In the later, this is varyingly couched in the language of discipline and safety. The spectre of violence against women in public spaces is deployed effectively to regulate the basic freedoms of women students, ignoring the high incidents of violence within the private sphere of the family and the community.

It is a fact that higher education provides not only an exposure to new ways of thinking, it also provides opportunities for new ways of being – a being free from the stifling hold of caste, community and the gender regulations that constitute these identities. The freedom to move about on the campus, the freedom to talk to others not mediated by the family or the neighbourhood, the freedom to dress and to leisure and of course the freedom to love and have sex is understood as a great threat to the order of Indian society.

The Impulse to Transgress

Can educational opportunities for women in a context such as India be simplistically translated into feminist interventions? A very palpable gulf seems to exist between the rhetoric and practice of women's education. (Paik 2015) Sites of women's education emerged in her words not only as sites of struggle but also as part of a political process of change.

Women's education is under close scrutiny and it is expected to perform a finely calibrated role of producing women citizens who would fit into the demands of a country seeking to improve its growth rate and yet not lose out on any of its traditions, many of which hinge upon hierarchy and structural violence. Women were expected to nurture and prepare a generation of Indians who would be active participants in nation building without distancing themselves from the traditional ethos of the country. Here, tradition remained an unexamined acceptance and normalization of the values, practices and aspirations of the upper caste, Hindu and largely north Indian sensibilities.

The late 90s, early years of this century have been characterized by bold and assertive voices from women, in many cases not necessarily a part of the recognized feminist groups, but strident voices that have successfully established connections between caste, sexuality, patriarchy and a certain conception of nationhood. Hence, some of the loudest concerns have been expressed about the celebration of Valentine's Day, public display of affection by young people, use of mobile phones by young women, women wearing western clothes and consuming alcohol. (Barnese 2015)

The expansion of education for Dalit and backward caste women is a crucial development of the 1990s, because caste hierarchy is intimately woven together with gender hierarchy. Opening the possibilities of formal education for Dalit and backward caste women shook the very edifice of the gendered caste hierarchies. However, interestingly, the Dalit womanhood that was sought to be created was one that has been described by Shailaja Paik as masculine Dalit womanhood premised on self reliance, fearlessness, mental resolve, daring and so on. This facilitated drawing Dalit women into collective action and political struggles; however there was a conspicuous silence around the question of the Dalit woman's precarious position with the body politics of caste India. Her body and sexuality remained regulated by the strictures of the community desirous of building a new image of it that was contingent to a very great extent on the imposition of certain kinds of sexual norms and codes of conduct. (Paik 2015) An interesting parallel can be drawn here with the overall enterprise of women's education – wherein women have been urged to educate and enlighten themselves and be enthusiastic partners in the project of nation-building, but their bodies and sexuality continue to be closely monitored and controlled to fit the imagination of the ideal Indian woman.

Institutions of higher education in India today are at a critical juncture in relation to the basic ideals of equality enshrined in the Constitution. Public education has undergone a tremendous demographic transformation resulting in greater heterogeneity on campuses – both with reference to students and faculty. Groups that were hitherto kept out of this sphere are today trying to stake claim to these public institutions. Nothing less than a quiet revolution has been taking place in institutions of higher education in recent years. The growth in enrollment has been significant, but more significant has been the demographic diversity of this enrollment. (Saksham 2013)

Out of total enrolment, on average 42 per cent are women, and in many states, they are in the majority. In comparison to the figure of 10 per cent at the time of independence, this situation of near parity at the demographic level is a significant aspect of the revolution that has been underway, one that has been growing at a heightened rate in the last decades. It is very significant that rates of growth in enrolment from social groups that even as recently as 20 years ago were effectively marginalized if not excluded from higher education have been steadily increasing.

Clearly, more and more families are sending their daughters and sons to college or university for several years, sometimes at considerable cost to themselves, in the hope of a new and better future. Huge aspirations for change are therefore being incubated in HEIs in India today.

This expansion of opportunities would however be an enabling experience in the true sense only if it were to be accompanied by the dignity and the ability to live, work and study without fear of harassment. Following the gang rape of December 16, 2012 in the city of Delhi there has been a renewed focus and awareness about the nature and extent of sexual violence in the country and the targeting of women students more specifically. The underlying misogyny has also come into greater focus. As more and more students access higher education in the hope of upward mobility, expanded knowledge and independent futures, the specter of violence has come to mar the everyday lives and aspirations of young women. (Saksham 2013)

Colleges and universities are complex institutions engaged in the education of future generations and are uniquely positioned to be the closest to fulfilling the potential of India's ideals of equality and social justice. These educational spaces are expected to assist in the creation of democratic citizenship and nurture a liberatory discourse for society at large. However, as the landmark Saksham report has demonstrated women students felt that the spaces of higher education do not assist them effectively to transition from the protected atmosphere of the home, into a life characterized by autonomy, agency and dignity. They felt the university did not take the women students seriously enough. Notices for lectures rarely reached women's hostels; they were not encouraged to go on educational trips or speak up at lectures or in class. Many stressed excessive moral policing and insistence on dress codes was echoed by several students. Poor infrastructural facilities and absence of transport facilities and health care on campus made it difficult for them to participate effectively as full members of the university community. (Saksham 2013)¹

¹ On the eve of International Working Women's Day, Maneka Gandhi gave a deeply patriarchal, casteist and classist statement to a media channel saying that hostel curfews are necessary as "Lax manRekha" for controlling women's "hormonal outbursts", that the question of "women's safety in colleges cannot be solved with just two Bihari guards with dandas", that there should be separate days for men and women to go to the library at night. (<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/maneka-gandhi-draws-twitterati-fire-for-hormonal-outbursts-comment/story-dwoWh4MlqJJD8ogvh1pO.html>)

Higher Education falls short of delivering on the goal of social transformation and equity. Institutional environment, organizational structures within the higher education even in a state such as Kerala which has a history of matriliney and rather positive human development indices tend to perpetuate the idea of gender segregation as good practice for social health. Separate seating arrangements for men and women are the norm and widely and formally legitimized. Harsh disciplining, without compassion or understanding, for breaking these “gendered” rules indicates insensitivity to the needs of the generation. (KSHEC 2015)

Everyday institutional practices in several colleges and existing conventions tend to reinforce undemocratic and regressive practices. It is perhaps this kind of surveillance and control that is obsessive about women's morality and sexuality that has resulted in the anger of young women across Indian campuses. The struggles of the women students in Aligarh Muslim University² to use the library, the Pinjra Tod campaign spearheaded by women students of the University of Delhi and the recent movements of resistance against the hostel warden by women students at Banaras Hindu University are testimony to this. In all instances, there is an institutional anxiety about ‘protecting’ women as the institution sees itself as the custodian of the Indian nation – which is contingent upon the upholding of a largely Hindu upper caste, north Indian value system that attaches a disproportionate premium to sexual purity (inter caste/inter faith/ across nationality relations are frowned). Female virginity that is the basis of the idea that sex is to be regulated within marriage and for the purpose of procreation of preferably sons who would be socialized into ‘good’ citizens. Motherhood is seen as the natural calling of women, everything else is a mere distraction or past time. Pinjra Tod campaigners have poignantly asked for freedom from the mother and freedom for the mother, while declaring repeatedly their refusal to mother India! (Menon 2017)

Opportunities for women's education and the institutional networks have clearly expanded in post-independence India, however it does not necessarily transform into empowerment is the argument that that this paper is seeking to make. While educational opportunities for women could prove to be the harbinger of democratic change in Indian society, yet at this juncture the lives of women students in most Indian universities and colleges suggests that democracy stops at the doorsteps of their hostels. The infrastructural and everyday physical organization of transport, library, medical needs and living conditions suggest this even more acutely. (John 2012)

² Lieutenant General (ret'd) Zameeruddin Shah, the VC of AMU justified the policy of not allowing undergraduate women to use the main Maulana Azad Library. If more women are allowed, the vice chancellor said, the number of men in the library would swell by at least four times. It is ironic that Begum Waheed Jahan Begum and Sheikh Abdullah, the founders of AMU Women's College, demonstrated bravery in radically proposing a place of study for Muslim women in the early 1900s. Their ideas were progressive, perhaps even anachronistically so, at the time. (<http://www.firstpost.com/india/aligarh-muslim-universitys-female-students-stand-against-discriminatory-hostels-rules-mismanagement-3058128.html>) But demands for gender equality do not compete with other social justice issues at hand – rather, they are complementary. We cannot excuse continued discrimination against women while asking for minority rights. Therefore, we should question the government's and media's sudden concern with gender equality in AMU (this is after all a deeply conservative government), but let us not discount the gravity of the library issue for women who study and work there. (<https://scroll.in/article/689289/aligarh-muslim-university-women-should-not-back-down-just-because-bjp-has-taken-up-their-cause>)

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