

# Challenge To Whom?

## -An Analysis Of “The Challenge Of Education” Report

*The government’s new education policy professes to prioritise girls’ education. We present here two articles that examine different aspects of this policy.*

*The Challenge Of Education* (COE), a report presented to the parliament and suggested as a base for discussion in formulating a New Education Policy, has been the subject of controversy. This article attempts to start a debate on how the COE, if implemented, will affect women and girls.

Although education of girls has shown an increase in the last 30 years, illiteracy continues to be much higher amongst girls than amongst boys. According to *The Challenge Of Education* (COE) literacy is lowest among the poor peasant and agricultural labourer families in rural areas and amongst families employed in the informal sector in urban areas.

In rural areas, 40 percent of men and 18 percent of women are reported to be literate.

The brighter side of the picture, educated women, does not appear so bright if one looks at employment figures. The incidence of unemployment is higher amongst women, and the rise of unemployment is also faster among them. Among graduates during 1956-57, the level of unemployment among women was six percent, but it rose to 16 percent by 1977-78 whereas for men the rise was from four percent to eight percent.

### Let Things Alone?

The Education Commission of 1964-66 had taken note of the way women and girls are burdened with domestic work. This inhibits them from competing on an equal basis in the job market. It is one of the reasons that they are employed at the lowest levels and in low income jobs.

The Commission had recommended that special schemes be devised and funds provided for them on a priority basis to “close the existing gap between men and women in as short a time as possible.”

However, the COE does not intend to intervene but seems to leave the process to market considerations. It talks with certainty of the modernisation of the economy and educational processes, but is uncertain about the effects of this on women, and seems quite content to remain uncertain: “There are serious difficulties in presenting a comprehensive...projection of future scenarios because of lack of clarity ... about the impact of modernisation on the process of urbanisation and participation of women.”

One of the bases of a scientific approach to a problem is to locate the mistakes committed earlier and to rectify them. The dismal state of women’s literacy and education today calls for such an approach. But the COE seems to accept the present problems as irremediable and looks for palliatives. Thus, instead of looking for ways to induce girls to come to school, and stay there, the COE thinks in terms of allowing them to drop out and then finding some sort of substitute programme for them: “Girls and children of the poor and illiterate families need special remedial programmes.” One such remedial measure seems to be nonformal education “conceived to meet the needs of the dropouts, especially girls, who, it was felt could not come to the school because of other pressures and preoccupations.”

The COE argues for spending the limited resources on what it calls viable educational institutions; stressing “the need for pace setting schools to demonstrate what good instruction and a good curriculum can do to raise the competence of boys and girls.” This kind of specialised pace setting school system will not only generate an elite but will mean an inequitable availability of opportunities to females. Girls will be discriminated against both because of preferential treatment of boys within the family and because of a male dominated teaching community that makes the selection.

The report notes with particular care this social bias of families and educational institutions. However, through the entire length and breadth of the report, there is no mention of how this process can be reversed or this social bias corrected. For instance, the report notes: “Many parents still hesitate in sending girls to the coeducational institutions and are particularly averse to those in which there are no women teachers.” But the COE does not consider reservation of jobs for women in the teaching sector as a way to increase the enrolment of girls as well as to bridge the unemployment gap between educated men and women.

### No Subsidies

In higher and technical education, the report says that universities’ performance is poor and “finds no justification for subsidising higher education to the extent that it is being done today. The need for the funds can be met through increased fees...” This

policy will also, in the long run, lead to lowering the enrolment rates of women, unless girl students, like SC and ST students, are subsidised. Given limited resources, families will prefer to give higher education to boys, particularly since highly productive jobs are more easily available to boys. Although, in theory, women are entitled to equal opportunity in employment, the individual employer tends to look on women employees as a liability, in part because of costs like maternity benefits and childcare.

Therefore, if the COE is implemented, and fees for higher education are raised without any subsidy for women, this will result in thorough neglect of women.

Apparently, women are to drop out of the system without any rectification measures. The COE harps only on what it calls the limited resources and not on allocation of those resources to those who are in most need. The result of this emphasis is that most women are to be branched off into nonformal schemes of education, although these are only mentioned, not elaborated. There seems to be no concrete idea of what this nonformal system will mean. When discussing parents' unwillingness to send girls to distant schools or coeducational schools, COE says: "Resource constraints, however, do not permit the opening of separate schools for boys and girls or setting up of a much larger number of schools, to bring them closer to village habitat. What alternatives could be devised by way of vocational training in place of the formal education under the 10 + 2 model so that skills relevant to rural environment and employment opportunities could be imparted, needs careful consideration. Not many ideas have emerged in this regard thus far."

When talking of university education, the report, which had clubbed women together with SC and ST as a depressed section, suddenly forgets to mention them; the equity argument is replaced by an efficiency argument. The

only remedial measure suggested for females is this one at the primary level, on which "not many ideas have emerged." This is in sharp contrast to the Education Commission 1964-66, which had set up a target that in the next 10 years women students should be 33 percent of the total in higher education. The Education Commission 1964-66 also had recommended a programme of scholarships for women in colleges, and provision of hostel accommodation for women on a large scale, for which the government should provide liberal grants.

enough to demonstrate this antiwomen bias. Let us take book 1 for class one as an example. On the cover, it has a set of boys, no girls, playing with a puppet. Lesson 1 shows the boy holding a football while the girl carries a doll. In lesson 2 the father reads a book while the mother sits on a sofa. This pattern is more or less persistent.

In lesson 20 only boys are shown at the school, but females are shown as teachers along with males. The girls are occasionally shown with a pen as are the boys but boys are never shown cooking, as all the girls are, in lesson 31.



—UNICEF

On the other hand, the COE harps on the theme of resource constraints. Women have to pay for the presumed lack of resources.

### **Ignores Biases**

The report harps on the need for "national unity and integration" and "modernisation" but completely neglects the learning process. It does not point out major lacunae in the teaching process, the curriculum and the text books, which produce an antiwomen ideology.

A cursory look at the books prepared and published by the prestigious Central Institute of English, Hyderabad, is

Girls' games are skipping and hopping while boys' games are shown as cricket, football and carrom. The only place women are shown doing a daring act is at the circus. Only the last lesson is determinedly egalitarian as though to anticipate criticism. Parents are shown drinking tea while children of both sexes are studying. However, this one lesson cannot counteract the systematic tendency throughout the book to assign males all productive jobs, games and adventure and females cooking, domestic work, dancing, skipping, passive postures.

In a system determined educational

process, female roles will reflect the dominant ideologies of that system, and educational methods will be readjusted to them. But, in a system changing process, attempts will be made to break this ideological stranglehold on female roles and to bring in a change. *The Challenge Of Education* seems to be essentially system determined as far as women are concerned and hence is a step backwards compared to the Education Commission of 1964-66.

Women in contemporary India face two major processes which obstruct



their attainment of full human status. The first restricts their entry into jobs that are created in the modern sector and removes them from the productive jobs they have been doing in the traditional sector.

The second process is that of the patriarchal family system where the division of labour is sex based. These two processes are ideologically incorporated into the educational system. The reorientation of the educational system suggested by the COE is based on what is called modernisation, with its uncertain effects on women and its determination to build unity in the country by means of a centralised authority. This could be a disaster for women, particularly for women of lower income groups. Thus *The Challenge Of Education* report is in fact a challenge to women.

DINESH MOHAN

## One Step Forward Or Backward? —Some Thoughts on the NEP

The significance of the education of girls cannot be overemphasised. For full development of our human resources, the improvement of homes, and for moulding the character of children during the most impressionable years of infancy, the education of woman is of even greater importance than that of man. As stated earlier, the education of women can assist greatly in reducing the fertility rate..." (6.53) An important problem is to enable women to carry out their dual role of home making and following a suitable career. The Census of 1961 shows that there are at present more than a million young women, below the age of 24 and with a minimum qualification of matriculation who are working only as housewives—and this number will increase still further in the days ahead. To enable these women to participate in programmes of national reconstruction, opportunities for part time employment will have to be greatly increased. In addition, they will have to be drawn, wherever possible, into all types of nation building activities on an honorary basis as well. Side by side, opportunities for full time employment will also have to be expanded... Teaching nursing and social service are well recognised areas where women can have a useful role to play. Opportunities for women will have to be largely expanded in these fields and several new avenues, covering almost all the different walks of life, will have to be opened out." (6.57)... *Education and National Development: Report of the Education Commission 1964-66.*

"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 decision makers and administrators, and the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women's studies will be promoted as a part of various courses and educational institutions encouraged to take up active programmes to further women's development..." (42). The removal of women's illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to and retention in elementary education will receive overriding priority, through provision of special monitoring. Major emphasis will be laid on women's participation in vocational, technical and professional education at different levels. The policy of nondiscrimination will be pursued vigorously to eliminate sex stereotyping in vocational and professional courses and to promote women's participation in nontraditional occupations, as well as in existing and emergent technologies." (43) *National Policy on Education, 1986.*

These extracts indicate the rhetorical changes over the past 20 years in Indian officialdom. There have been some real changes too: during the period 1950-1951 to 1982-1983 the total girls' enrolment in education increased at the compound growth rate of 5.5 percent while the comparable rate for boys was 3.9 percent per year.<sup>1</sup> Enrolment figures for number of girls for every 100 boys enrolled are shown in the table.

As with any other postindependence development statistics in India, we can take pride in "improvement in spite of heavy odds against us" or we can demand

TABLE

Number of girls enrolled for every 100 boys enrolled

Level	1950-51*	1965-66*	1982-83*
Primary	39	55	63
Middle	21	35	51
Secondary	15	26	42
University	14	24	37
Professional	5	14	11*

\*Not including commerce and education faculties. Not comparable with earlier statistics.

a better deal. As one who believes that we can do much better and must do much better as far as basic needs of the people are concerned, I demand a better deal. The above statistics clearly show that there was no real spurt in improving the educational status of women after 1966. Neither does the New Education Policy (NEP) show any promise of radically changing the situation.

One would have expected a spiralling of expectations and an exponential increase in demands for better education for women after independence. Educationists would have us believe that education is an agent of social change and that as more people get educated we will have more demand for change. Obviously, change comes slowly in our society and this slow change does not leave the educational structure untouched. Therefore, as the number of educational institutions increases in a very inegalitarian manner the pressure on the elite institutions increases disproportionately:

As it becomes more and more difficult and expensive to get into an elite institution, there is more pressure on families to prepare boys and not girls for these institutions. This is clearly indicated by the very slow increase in female emoluments in elite institutions in India. But the framers of the NEP do not seem to understand this. Otherwise, they would never have agreed to the proposal for residential Navodaya Vidyalayas or district model schools.

The problem with the NEP is that it discriminates against women in its major

thrusts such as model schools, residential institutions and higher fees for tertiary education, but allocates special programmes for women in other areas. One would have thought that in a caste ridden, hierarchical, patriarchal society, our main priority would be universal schooling for all through neighbourhood schools, English medium education and proliferation of "public schools" would obviously have no place in such a system, as these rigidly preserve a hierarchical structure and reinforce the subjugation of women.

The competition to get into the Navodaya Vidyalayas or "model" schools



will be intense and expensive coaching classes will soon spring up to train young boys and girls for the entrance tests. This will ensure that mainly boys and only daughters of relatively richer families will end up entering these institutions as the poorer families will not like to spend much on daughters. These schools will feed the second level institutions of higher learning. The elite institutions will probably still remain to preserve the products of "public" schools. In this way, many bright girls will get filtered out at an early age.

The second problem is that these schools are to be residential institutions. NEP authors don't seem to realise that a lot of parents would not like to send their children to boarding schools. In addition, even upper class parents do not like to send daughters to boarding schools. But the NEP envisages more residential institutions at all levels of education. It is incredible that the same people who rant and rave about the "inhuman" communist system which supposedly takes away children from parents to "brainwash" them are so cavalier about the introduction of boarding institutions in India.

Right through the debate on the NEP, there has been a constant reminder from economists that the fees for higher education should be raised. This has been accepted in the NEP.<sup>4</sup> This can also have the effect of poorer parents discouraging their daughters from tertiary education. It is true that, at present, rich people get higher education at highly subsidised rates and the system needs to be changed, but a mere increase in fees and scholarships may not turn out to be that equitable either. It may be much better to combine generous scholarships with service contracts for people to engage in rural work, teaching and health services, which may keep frivolous males out of higher education and make it easier for committed girls to get in.

We could even try a system where a maintenance scholarship and an endowment (say Rs 50,000) is automatically awarded to the top few percentile graduates of every secondary board in the country. The endowment

would become the property of any educational institution or business which the boy or girl decides to join. The total amount spent on this scheme could be cut from the present block grants of universities on some proportional basis. Such a system might reduce the hegemony of elite colleges and institutions as some students would elect to go to institutions closer to home, or work in their actual field of interest, or even encourage entrepreneurship. In this scheme, it would be difficult for parents of bright girls to dissuade them from useful higher learning as all kinds of institutions would be wooing them.

We have no such new scheme in the NEP which might ensure more equality for women in spite of the prevailing social norms. While the NEP has strong statements on equality of women, the authors slip up when they justify women's education for population control : "The largest single factor that could help

achieve this is the spread of literacy and education among women."<sup>5</sup> Why does education of any sector of the population have to be justified in such crude terms? The danger of such reasoning is that we end up seeing human beings as vehicles of state policy rather than desirable state policy being the result of happier human beings. Why cannot we just say that all boys and all girls should get proper formal education because in the late 20th century we consider this a basic human right?

There are many other strong positive statements in the NEP regarding women's education : "The critical development issue today is... promotion of women's equality..." "day care centres will be provided..." "...At least two teachers, one of whom is a woman, should work in every school (elementary)", "...the government will, however, take special steps to cater to the needs of women (vocational courses)." At the same time, the NEP also gives great importance to our "heritage."<sup>7</sup>

We should take the positive statements at face value and use them to pressure the government to reverse the policies which would harm women's education and would promote the negative features of our heritage.

#### Notes :

1. *Challenge Of Education : A Policy Perspective*, Ministry of Education, New Delhi, August 1985. p. 17.
2. *Education and National Development : Report on the Education Commission 1964-65*, National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi. 1971, p. 239.
3. *Challenge Of Education*, op. cit, p. 19.
4. *National Policy on Education - 1986*, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, New Delhi, May 1986, p. 28.
5. *Ibid.* p. 3.
6. *Ibid.* p. 9, 10, 11, and 13 respectively.
7. *Ibid.* p. 21.

## Protest Against Bride's Death

On April 2, 1986, Sucheta, a 22 year old newly wed, died in Ahmadgarh, Punjab, under suspicious circumstances. The Ludhiana branch of the Jamhuri Adhikar Sabha, Punjab, prepared an investigative report after talking to Sucheta's parents, reading her personal diary, going through the post mortem reports, meeting with her natal and her husband's families, and also with the neighbours in both localities.

Sucheta belonged to an educated, middle class family. She had a BA, BEd degree and by all accounts, seems to have been an intelligent and very sensitive woman. She was married on October 21, 1985, and her parents spent Rs 80,000 on the wedding. However, her husband's family was not satisfied and kept taunting her about not having brought enough dowry.

In her diary she writes that a few days before the marriage, they demanded Rs 20,000 in cash from her parents: She was not aware of this at that time. Her father was

upset by the demand and thought it might be wiser to refuse. She later wrote: "Daddy thought if they are already putting forward demands, what will happen later?" At a later point in her diary she writes, "Beeji (the mother-in-law) is greedy. Every time I go home she wants me to bring back something."

She was repeatedly insulted because of her short height and because she did not meet the standards of physical beauty that her husband desired. He often threatened to divorce her, and talked of "bringing a new beautiful bride." Her movements were restricted and she was not allowed to sit alone with her parents.

She died five months after her marriage. The in-laws claim that she committed suicide by hanging herself from the ceiling fan. In the report prepared by the Jamhuri Adhikar Sabha, the investigators argue that no one, apart from the in-laws, actually saw her hanging, and that the position of the room was such that she could have been

murdered without the neighbours knowing it. There was also no high level object in the room on which she could have stood to reach the fan. Furthermore, the post mortem report points out that her eyes were not open or bulging, her tongue was not hanging out, as is normal in cases of hanging, and the first vertebra of the spinal column was displaced.

Her in-laws attempted to hide her diary, in which she wrote "Here everybody's one wish is my death." The committee contended that her husband's family should be held responsible even if she did commit suicide since they made her so miserable.

It was only as a result of concentrated public pressure that the family was arrested. Students of the Rajindra Hospital, Ludhiana, held a protest meeting, which was attended by about 500 people. They succeeded in forcing the police to take action against Sucheta's in-laws.

—Nirmal Kaur  
(translated from Punjabi)