

"How Women Make a Country Literate"

How can women become stakeholders in a technology driven development paradigm, if they are excluded from learning how these technologies work either to their advantage or to their detriment? Technology may be (and I have my doubts) gender neutral but its use often is not.

TODAY, the best informed survives. Access to knowledge is itself a kind of power, perhaps more important than any other. Unfortunately there are haves and have-nots in the ecology of knowledge. The have-nots are invariably the poor but within them the women. The women are what Amartya Sen calls history's "persistent losers". The question that I want to pose today is how best we alter the situation. Openly confronting the matter of female illiteracy and their lack of access to information at all levels? Or carrying the issue on the momentum of educating all? If a society pursues the goal of universal basic education and that of equal opportunity at all levels of education and technology access, why put women first?

The answer is obvious in a societal context where social hierarchy and consequent family-structures stress the relative importance of men and boys over women and girls. As I pointed in this column last week, if a "culture dictates that girls will grow only to serve a future husband's family, formal education may be viewed as a waste of time and girls will not be encouraged to go to school". The situation is exacerbated by poverty. When a family can barely afford to send one child to school, it is the girl child who is kept at home.

In such a situation, if the policy framework takes a 'neutral' stance on the status of girls and women acknowledging equal rights and opportunities without making provisions for a mechanism that these rights are protected, women may find themselves no better off than before. It is only an affirmative and pro-active approach to improving the status of women and their access to education that can overcome

some of the cultural and economic factors which place them in unequal position.

A good example from our neighboring country India is cited by V.K. Ramachandran in a dialogue on the issue. He refers to an article by Robin Jeffery entitled, "How Women Made Kerala Literate" and his argument is as follows:

"In the first decade of the century the state of Baroda in Gujarat and the state of Travancore, now part of modern Kerala, (both were princely states, and not part of British India) had the same levels of male literacy and both of them had state-declared policies of mass-education. Why is it that Kerala is at the top today and Baroda, far behind? Because at that time Kerala took up the issue of women's literacy in a very serious way; and Baroda remained far behind in that respect. The experience has been that unless the question of female literacy is tackled specifically, larger plans for literacy will not succeed.

In Kerala during the recent mass literacy programme, women were absolutely critical to the success of the programme, particularly women educators from traditionally excluded communities like the fisherfolk. In certain sections of the Muslim community where certain sections of the Muslims were less literate, women educators made the difference, and unless the educators are willing to destabilize the patriarchal establishment by taking up specific issues of female literacy, the literacy programme will be unsuccessful.

ful".

The Kerala experience confirms the importance of women's literacy in creating new levels of human development. Kerala's life expectancy today is 69 years for men and 73, for women. Infant mortality in 1990 was 17 per 1000. Kerala has clearly shown that if fertility rates are to be brought down, infant mortality and deaths rates must be brought down and if that is to happen, female survival and education must be assured. In other words the choices for and capabilities of women in Kerala have been enlarged and in the process their entitlement and access to re-

broken down, as the Kerala experience illustrates, by dismantling the barrier of women's access to information and enhancing women's capabilities through active and full participation in the enterprise of learning at all levels. Benefits of knowledge particularly technological advances therefore, must be made more equally available to women.

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Do or Die
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sources and decision-making. Also important victories have been won by the disadvantaged people against domination by higher caste and the ignominy of untouchability.

But if we look at many other parts of the sub-continent Amartya Sen's well-known indictment regarding 100 million missing women, who have been doomed to premature graves because of gender bias in various forms, still remains painfully valid. Even though primary health care is a public good women are less equal in their access to it as many other public goods.

Such lack of access can be

Sivási. There are interviews with local match factory owners in that dry district with very little income possible from the land. The factory-owners, locally powerful as they are, have dictated that the kids ought not to be sent to school. They ought to be working in the factories and be grateful for being allowed to do so. Systematically degraded as they are, the children themselves and their parents say exactly the same things as the factory-owners have tutored them to say and never about their real interests. Or what Paul Frier calls 'a culture of silence' prevails.

It is, therefore, no wonder that in some communities in the hinterland of our own country, the power-holders are in direct opposition to women's education and the women, structurally oppressed and isolated as they are, apparently acquiesce since their muted grievances are never heard in the corridors of power. For the local power-holders such programmes are destabilising of the social hierarchy. Literacy makes women aware of their rights and demands that they can make of the leadership, in the household, in the community or at higher echelons. Pillars of society cannot allow such outcasts to share the exclusive privileges of the enchanted circle of the wise and the wealthy.

Literacy movement, as has been seen in Kerala can become the entry point for agrarian transformation, and a place where girls and boys, women and men of the peasantry and agricultural laborer households

get together. "When that happens, the literacy movement itself becomes a vehicle for social transformations in the village. Then, certain governments get worried because literacy programmes can make a political difference" (V.K. Ramachandran).

In that context, the rhetoric of compassion is self-deception by the compassionate at its worst and at its best a delusion. If I may take liberty with Leo Tolstoy by substituting the gender, allow me to quote him:

"I sit on a woman's back choking her and making her carry me and yet assure myself and others that I am very sorry for her and wish to lighten her load by all means except getting off her back".

What is perhaps more important than compassion is for the women and all the disadvantaged segments of the population to get together and get organized. If I may borrow from Amartya Sen and repeat what I said last week, in politics as in economics, it is demand that influences more. If the women and the disadvantaged men can make a demand collectively, strongly and persistently, that demand will be met tomorrow or the day after.

In a society deeply divided between those in a strong position to defend their right and those who are excluded and whose demands are often not recognized as legitimate, the central notion of solidarity transcends a certain individualistic conception of right. Self-preservation and realization are not achieved through each individual pursuing her/his own vaguely understood interest, but through social solidarity. It is only through such solidarity groups that the excluded and the outcast can break out of their closure exclusion and categorization.