CHAPTER 9

Subaltern Perspectives in Adult Education

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1 Introduction

The pattern of gender inequality in access to education in India is intriguing, which seems to be deepening as we move from lower to higher education attainment and from urban to rural and to disadvantaged groups in the society. Scheduled caste, scheduled tribes and Muslim minorities have higher levels of adult illiteracy, particularly among women. The illiterate adults from these groups face unemployment or are struggling to come out of their traditional demeaning jobs, subjugated by employers and landowners, therefore being further pushed into the vicious cycle of exploitation and poverty. The challenge is to reach a large number of women, particularly from socio economically disadvantaged groups and to bridge the gender gap.

The intersectionality of class, gender, caste, race, religion, age, language and geographical region affects the educational experiences of an individual. The gendered experience of a lower caste or tribal women can be quite different from upper caste urban women. Similarly, the experiences of Hindu women would differ from the experiences of muslim women from both rural and urban areas. Though, in the policy arena, 'women', 'marginalised' and 'indigenous' are often considered as homogeneous categories. Despite the improvement in the literacy rates, inequality in terms of gender, social categorization (scheduled caste and scheduled tribes), rural-urban divide continue to be eminent. According to 2011 Census of India, the literacy rates among scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and muslim communities are much lower than the rest of the population, more so among women. The 2011 census revealed that the overall literacy rate among SCs is 66.07% (Male SCs 75.17% & Female SCs 56.46%). Whereas the literacy rate among scheduled tribe is even worse with 58.95% (Male STs 68.51% & Female STs 49.36%) (Government of India, 2011a). The entire population of the country is divided into different caste, creed and religion. According to the Census (2011) data, the percentage of illiterates is 36.4% for Hindus, 32.5% for Sikhs, 28.2% for Buddhists, 25.6% for Christians and 42.7% for Muslims. The overall percentage of illiterates is 36.9 % for all communities. Subsequently, the Christian community has 74.3 per cent

literacy, followed by Buddhists (71.8 per cent), Sikhs (67.5 per cent), Hindus (63.6 per cent) and Muslims (57.3 per cent).

The paper addresses the central questions: Why do Adult Education policies in India fall short to attain a respectable national literacy rate among women, especially among underprivileged women? How beneficial will be the formal adult education for the marginalized groups? And whether the adult education programmes address the issue of women's overall development and empowerment?

I take an interdisciplinary approach drawing on postcolonial theory, education, sociology, development studies and gender studies to develop an analysis of some adult education and women's empowerment programmes in India and their understanding of literacy, inclusion, empowerment, identities, development and social change. Different socio-cultural fields intersect and affect the world of adult education practices, and a broader understanding of adult learning is required to address the needs of gendered adult learners. Who defines what kind of education is empowering for marginalised women? Why should functional literacy be connected to critical education?

2 Women's Adult Education versus the Adult Education for Subaltern Women: Whose Language, Whose Knowledge and Whose Structures?

Adult education programmes developed for the marginalised communities such as scheduled tribes, scheduled caste and minorities hardly ever address the gender inequalities (Government of India, 2011b). There is a need to develop specific policies for women from the disadvantaged communities that can provide space for gendered voices within marginalised groups. The term subaltern is used as a "name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Guha & Spivak, 1988, p. 35). The gendered subaltern subjects of this paper are the women from aboriginal tribes, lower caste and other minority sections who have to overcome many marginalising social constructions to attain education. The oppression of these women is based on their economic situations (class), caste, gender and religion, and therefore their circumstances and social problems are different from a woman coming from upper class, upper caste or urban location. Their situations and social position are directly related to their participation and degree of success in an adult education programmes. Additionally, their interest and motivation in literacy programmes also vary from the other group of women. Social institutions

such as religion, marriage and family further marginalise these women and decrease their chances of acquiring social, educational, economical or political power. Therefore, an adult education agenda planned for "women" (which is not a homogenous group) is unable to fulfill the social requirements or to empower the subaltern subjects.

The dominant adult education discourse tends to emphasize women's education with regards to improved health outcomes for mothers and children; there is rarely any notice paid to the dangers of promoting stereotypes in syllabus or vocational training programmes. The curriculum is usually built around women's reproductive role with programs related to family planning, nourishment and childcare (Rao & Pant, 2006). International policy on adult education has emphasized the significance of educating women to increase their participation in the development of a country but failed to take a gendered stance on curriculum and programme design. Only a few recent policy documents have mentioned a different perspective for female education (see UNESCO, 2002) that goes beyond educating women as wives and mothers.

Education should be related to critical consciousness of the relationship between women's lives and the broader socio-political structures. To gain education means being able to decode the social, political, economical and patriarchal structures and actively trying to deconstruct its norms. Critical education, supports women in dealing with existing power structures, work collectively and bring change. Adult education can enable women to access the means of empowerment. The education should not only be about the literacy of 3R's-reading, writing and arithmetics, but also about creating awareness of social inequalities and discrimination.

The adult literacy programmes started by the government supposed to cover three dimensions of education-literacy, awareness and functionality. However, in practice, the programmes have become only literacy campaigns because most of the adult education centres are not equipped to address the other two basic modules of adult education programmes (UNESCO, 2002). The adults find no motivation to join or continue these programmes as they do not find them useful in fulfilling their environmental needs. An ethnographic study (Chopra, 2011) of a lower caste woman in Bihar reclaimed that the gendered illiterate subjects face multiple oppression within different dimensions of power relations that include the socio-economic institution, religion, culture and gender. Laila, a sharecropper, has participated in local 'women's organisation agriculture and income generation programmes', but opted out from literacy classes after ten days. She asserted that the agriculture programme is more meaningful for her as she learnt about cultivating barren lands with the help of non-chemical fertilisers, which pesticides to use for different crops and how

to make living compost. The programme has also helped her in developing self-confidence to introduce new ideas in her agricultural work while working on the land independently. On the other hand, she stated that learning to read and write requires a lot of time. She is too busy with her everyday life practices to earn a living and therefore does not have enough time to devote to a literacy class. However, she recognises that it would be helpful to read the name of different chemicals, seeds and pesticides she wants to use in the field. Also, she acknowledges it would be useful to be able to write and manage her income and expenditure. That way she will be able to figure out when her landlord is cheating her, and how to apply for a bank loan to buy her own piece of land.

The study brings forward many questions related to the adult education of marginalised subjects. Bihar has one of the lowest literacy rates in India (UNESCO, Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2006), a woman coming from lower caste from that state is suppressed thrice because of her gender, caste, class and in some cases of her religion as well. What kind of adult education does she require for the betterment of her condition? What does literacy mean for a marginalised woman? Who defines literacy for her? In Laila's case, she works as a sharecropper, which means she works in the fields of a landlord -generally a Bhumihar (upper-class landowner). She does not own any land because normally only upper caste men owned the lands and she did not have the sufficient financial ability to purchase the land so she has to work on a Zamindar's land, and the landlord usually changes his tenants after few years. There is a contract between Landlord and Sharecropper, and as per the contract the Sharecropper would borne the entire expenditure of crop production and the produced crop will be distributed among Land owner and Sharecropper in the ratio 40:60 as given in the Contract. The land owners fear that through the Bihar Land Ceiling Act 1961 the tenant will claim the ownership to the land. Therefore, Laila might have to look for another agricultural land every few years. Additionally, females receive fewer wages in compare to their male counterpart for the same amount of work in most of the provinces (except few provinces of North East) of India, "In the agriculture sector, where the women participation rate is more than the estimated 60%, the hourly wage rates of women in 50 to 75% of male rates" (Javeed and Manuhar, 2013). An adult education programme for Laila and many women like her who come from the lower caste in rural settings should focus on imparting critical education and awareness and not just the literacy of 3R's -reading, writing and arithmetics.

The gender identities are hardly mentioned or prioritised in the discourse related to the education of scheduled tribes, scheduled castes or other minorities. The adult education policies for the marginalised groups require a gendered perspective especially in terms of curriculum, language, programme

objectives, assessment and learning structures. The special provisions made for the scheduled tribes have often benefited the boys over girls. In 1999, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs was set up to address the needs of the tribal population. Similarly, the Ministry of Minority Affairs was carved out of Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment and created on 29th January 2006, to ensure a more focused approach towards issues relating to the notified minority communities namely Muslim, Christian, Buddhists, Sikhs, Parsis and Jain. The mandate of the Ministry includes formulation of overall policy and planning, coordination, evaluation and review of the regulatory framework and development programmes for the benefit of the minority communities. One of the programmes implemented by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs was focused on providing vocational skills training to the women and girls. Although the budget was minimal for this project, the strategy was to set up the residential schools for the children from tribal communities. A study (Rao, 2005, p. 89) in the Dumka district in eastern India reported that the ratio of boys to girls was 10:1. Some of the reasons for this disparity in participation might be the societal attitude towards the education of girls and families do not see the connection between the education of girls and their everyday reality.

The intersection of caste, religion and gender is quite apparent in formal settings. It has been noted that special provisions for scheduled tribes have been in favour of boys and when special provisions are made for girls and women, they have scarcely benefitted women from scheduled tribes. These examples show that 'women and girls', 'Muslim minorities', 'scheduled castes' and 'scheduled tribes' are marked out in policy as disadvantaged groups in educational terms. However, in the policy arena, 'women', 'SCs and STs' and 'minorities' are still considered homogenous categories, not differentiated by economic status, gender, religion or age.

The voices of aboriginal tribes, scheduled caste and other minorities need space and representation at the policy level to present their positions on the national platform. The deprived classes need representation at the decision making or policy design stage which is only possible if the members of these groups are part of state and national governments. Since the subjects of this paper are the subalterns, who are the women from the disadvantaged communities, it is proper to investigate their representation in the parliament. The representation of women in leadership positions in the parliament is not very satisfactory. As of January 2019, out of 543 members of Lok Sabha (lower house of Indian Parliament), only 66 (12 per cent) were women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019). How many of these women belong to the minority categories? The notion of women's participation can also be viewed as women acquiring power over curriculum planning and policy formation (Stromquist, 1998).

Gayatri Spivak asserted empowerment as a "posture of autonomy adopted in the desire to create new spaces to self-identity and self-representation within the hegemony of structural and systematic realities" (Spivak, 1996, p. 289). The subaltern subject of this paper requires the self-identification and self-representation in the adult education policies and programmes of the state. The position of the subalterns can also be viewed through the lens of post colonial studies where the educated and the economically dominant determine policies and education for the already marginalised people (a new form of colonization). It is crucial to connect adult education to agency and voice; critical education can help in achieving this objective. They do not receive an education that provides them voice and agency that means the power and the freedom to act (Sen, 1999).

A critical adult education related to the discourse of rights and self-determination will address the needs of these marginalised groups. The adult education policy makers have to deal with the question of language and pedagogy choice for this specific population. Another issue within the context of adult education for tribal people is the distinction between adult education for indigenous communities (which purposes the access to established educational order) and indigenous adult education (which implies the control over the syllabus and learning material).

The tribal population is not a homogenous group of people, they differ regarding language, culture, religion and internally across the lines of class, gender and age. Although, in the international and national policy sphere they are often considered together as a big group that differ ethnically but similar in terms of their attitude towards nature and natural resources. The effects of colonisation such as loss of land and resources, the inevitable globalisation and neoliberal policies of the government have further pushed them towards the periphery (Kapoor, 2011). India has more than 400 indigenous or tribal groups thet account for 8.6% or 104 million of the whole population of the country (World Bank, 2016). They include a diverse group which is often referred as 'scheduled tribes', 'Adivasi' or Aboriginal people. The Constitution of India, Article 366 (25) recognises scheduled tribes but does not mention the specific criteria for categorisation of any community as "scheduled tribe". An often used criterion for scheduled tribes is their geographical isolation, economic backwardness, distinct culture, language and religion.

A survey conducted to identify the Below Poverty Line population by the Planning Commission of India in 2012 found that scheduled castes and tribes comprise half of the entire "poor, deprived households". The survey restated the long held proposition that Dalits are the most disadvantaged and underprivileged sections of the population. Poverty, illiteracy, homelessness and

destitution are all interconnected conditions for an overall situation of a human being. Ramamurthi Committee's report in 1990 recommended that for the adult education programmes to be successful, they have to be linked simultaneously with basic needs-health, nutrition, housing and employment.

Indian society is divided on the basis of caste hierarchy, religious associations, linguistic diversity and regional allegiance. The caste system in India has strong historical and religious roots. Traditionally, Indian or particularly Hindu society was categorised into thousands of castes, which resulted into socio-economic and educational inequality. The major economic categories in today's Indian society according to caste stratification are Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST), Forward Caste (FCS) and Other Backward Castes (OBCS). Since the independence of India, 1947, the India government has been making several policy provisions and efforts to bridge the socio-economic and educational divide between the privileged and underprivileged groups. Despite all the attempts made by the government and the non-governmental organisations, some specific groups like SCS and STS remain economically, politically and educationally disadvantaged because of their particular traditional occupations and geographical conditions (Chauhan, 2008).

A greater number of members from these groups, particularly in the rural areas, are landless agricultural workers (often exploited by the landlords through the social evil of bonded labour) who work on the land belonging to others or involved in the occupations such as manual scavenging and leather tanning. More than 75% of the scheduled caste workers are still involved in primary occupations as assigned by the caste system (Chauhan, 2008). These reasons compel the children from such communities to start earning at an early age. The social attitude and the lack of infrastructure make it difficult for the children from these communities to acquire education. Some of these factors contribute to a large number of non-literate adult population of these marginalised groups.

The education policies need to look deeper into the social reasons why the deprived groups are still outside the mainstream educational structures. In case of India, there is growing evidence that people from some specific ethnic groups are more likely to face difficulties in accessing educational opportunities because of inferior infrastructure in their specific geographical location, distance to school, attitude of teachers (many cases of caste-based discrimination by the teachers have been reported as a reason of dropouts by lower caste students) alien language, etc. (Chauhan, 2008).

Acquiring knowledge for Dalit (scheduled caste) women is an act of resistance against religion and other social structures. In the 'Rise and Fall of the Hindu Women' (1955), Ambedkar asserted that Brahmanism "denied women

the right to acquire knowledge" (p. 118) and "she was declared to be as uncleaned as untruth for want of knowledge" (Ambedkar, 1955, p. 119). Brahmanism declined knowledge to Dalits and women, so when a woman who is also a Dalit decides to attain education, she has to face many social barriers. For a Dalit woman, the struggle for literacy increases because of her material conditions. The Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (2010) developed by UNDP, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative declared that poverty level is highest amongst India's tribal populace (81.4 per cent), followed by scheduled caste (65.8 per cent) and OBC (Other Backward Class) (58.3 per cent). Amongst the rest of the population, the poverty level is 33.3 per cent. There is an established relationship between religious, institutional, socio-economic, political and cultural rooted caste and gendered norms which influence the expression of an individual. Hence, Dalit and tribal women literacy require particular attention in adult education policies to address multiple discriminations against their education.

3 Policy, Practices and the Need for Critical Education

A right based critical approach to adult education should not only be limited to 'conscientization' around a specific situation but also include developing the ability and confidence to initiate political action. Social issues such as gender, caste and region-based discrimination, unemployment, child labour, female foeticide and corruption remain areas of concern in India. Adult education practices in the rural areas do not address any of the social issues and claim to empower the illiterate subjects through the use of literacy of 3Rs-reading, writing and arithmetics. The most successful examples of critical education programmes come from the mobilisation of people through non-formal and informal adult education.

In Andhra Pradesh, India, Laya's (a resource centre for Adivasis) unconventional educational approach developed from experience with young tribal people who were protesting against the government land reforms in 1989 (D'Souza, 2003). The Laya team recognized that the tribal people who were campaigning did not demonstrate a 'broader vision of tribal rights'. Therefore, the team started a training programme for the young tribal people so that they can acquire a better understanding of the macro and micro level scenario such as deforestation, displacement, alienation from their land and how to address injustice within their tribes and communities. An important part of this training programme was learning about legal structures-laws that were related to tribal areas such as forest laws, displacement laws, the role of customary law

in a tribal context, etc. The participants were taken to visit district court to witness land cases and were trained in writing petitions and presenting problems to government representatives. The competencies and skills developed through this training programme include basic literacy, critical analysis and leadership. Women groups from different tribal communities started visiting each other to share their experiences and knowledge. As the programme further developed, participants and trainers started to identify the problems faced by tribal women and began a separate programme to address issues like lack of formal education institutions for girls, property rights for women, domestic violence, etc. The example of Laya's adult education programmes for tribal population demonstrates that critical education can work towards the political, social, cultural empowerment and development of marginalised people and communities and that the empowerment should be seen in broader terms as freedom from categorical (based on geographical, caste, religion), political and gender oppression.

Chipko Andolan (1973) or forest conservation movement in India is another example where adult learning activities triggered collective action by the people of a community. The role of civil society or non-governmental organisations was crucial in mobilising the tribal and marginalised people by increasing the ecological awareness and in slowing down the rapid deforestation. "Chipko" movement (tree hugging action) initiated by the women in the northern Himalayan part of Uttar Pradesh (now Uttarakhand) in India against the environmental and economic exploitation of the region. Women were the backbone for this venture, and therefore it is also seen as an eco-feminist movement (Moore, 2011). The Chipko Andolan was a non-violent protest that practised the Gandhian method of Satyagraha.

More recently, Bhangar Andolan (2013) against the acquisition of land for a power project in West Bengal's South 24 Parganas district in India created an example where adult learning associated with the collective action of people from Schedule Caste and Minority communities had instigated murmurs of protests in Bhangar area (Mehta, 2017). A few local leaders were able to mobilise Schedule Caste and Minorities and other marginalised people against the land acquisition by the government, where these people would lose their agricultural land permanently. The acquired land would be used for an electric power sub-station, and the eclectic power would be generated for the newly formed smart city near Kolkata, West Bengal. Semi-literate and illiterate people especially women were the major forces against the movement (Mehta, 2017). The Government of West Bengal ultimately admitted their demands and took sufficient measures towards the alternative arrangements.

The Total Literacy Campaign (TLCs) in Nellore and Pudukottai districts of Andhra Pradesh focused on not just teaching literacy skills but also empowering adults to deal with development issues. The Total Literacy Campaign was implemented by the Government of India in collaboration with the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti, a voluntary organisation that made a significant contribution towards developing a strategy for wide reaching community mobilisation of the poor, especially women, to change their economic conditions and struggle for gender equality. After the literacy stage, Jana Chetna Kendras (centres for people's awareness), were formed, which provided a space for neo literate women to discuss the problems faced by them in their villages. A lesson in the post literacy primer has inspired women from a small village in Andhra Pradesh to instigate a blockade against arrack (a form of country liquor) in their village and inspired others to join in the anti arrack agitation. The agitation, led by rural women, was also joined by several different organisations like civil liberties organisations, political parties, women's groups, voluntary organizations, etc. Involvement in the movement empowered these rural women and provided them with the confidence to fight against the liquor contractor and the administration. Following the agitation, the government proposed a ban on selling of arrack in the Nellore district in 1993, and later in the whole state of Andhra Pradesh. After the success of anti arrack agitation, some rural women established saving and credit groups called Podupalakshmi. The women's credit cooperatives were recreated in several other states like Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, and inspired women groups for starting income generating activities. However, not much attention was paid to sustaining and building upon the skills gained through the campaign.

Although some literacy campaigns managed to reach out to women and people from disadvantaged groups of society and mobilise them in a crucial way, the 'democratic space' inside the state funded adult literacy campaigns for women's empowerment remained restricted. The civil society too was ineffectual in creating independent organisational structures for the large majority of neo literate female learners to continue and sustain the activities of empowerment (Rao, 1993; Banerjee, 1993; Sexena, 1993). The mobilisation of women could not be continued in many villages as the administration was not able to cope with the rising demands of the local women's groups related to minimum wages, banning alcohol in the state, dealing with cases of domestic violence and employment opportunities for women. In the northern states of India, the achievement of Total Literacy Campaign is much slower. For example, in Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh the situations are different for adults and Dalits and they demand unconventional approaches (UNESCO, 2002).

4 Conclusion

Addressing gender concerns is not only about reaching women but including them in every aspect of adult education programme: planning, design, curriculum, training and evaluation. For policy, programme or campaign to be gender sensitive, it is crucial to consider the social relations that influence women's lives. The empowerment of the gendered "subaltern" cannot entirely be imagined through literacy programmes. The empowerment is a product of law, policies and socio-institutional practices. Despite the fact that women learners are the major participants in the adult education activities, they are almost invisible in the coordination, policy making or leadership positions. Women volunteers played a significant role during the mobilisation of women at the grass root level, but their contribution remained unrecognised. In spite of the large-scale women's participation in the literacy campaigns as learners and volunteers, the government does not pay enough attention to put women's issues on the agenda of the adult education policies (Ghose, 2007). There is a need for an inclusive, non-hierarchal undertaking of adult education and empowerment that can provide valid spaces for multiple voices within the underprivileged group.

The adult education programmes should focus more on vocational and entrepreneurial training for these women, to enable them to start making a living from their education. Economic and financial independence is an important aspect of empowerment for women, and there is a dire need to support the spirit of entrepreneurship among the women from the disadvantaged groups. Some of the micro enterprises that have been initiated in the rural areas are poultry farming, garment making, clothes embroidery and coconut oil extraction. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and recognition, validation and accreditation of prior learning (RVA) in non formal and informal sectors are two important strategies initiated by UNESCO that should be adopted by the government and the civil society in order to address the adult education and literacy challenges for women, especially from the marginalized communities. Adult education policy planners need to recognise that the other social fields intersect outside yet within the confines of adult education programmes. This may modify the adult education practitioner's perception of the illiterate subject.

The partnership between the government and non-governmental organisation is essential for successful implementation of literacy, post literacy and continuing education programmes. Although, people's movement (which sometimes challenge the neoliberal policies of government) for their

fundamental rights and grassroots organisations cannot be sustained through government sponsored programmes. The adult education programmes effectiveness is also reduced due to some practical difficulties like lack of coordination among various organisations, over stressing of rules, inadequate training for functionaries, non-profit organisations denied support from state governments, the absence of operative support from mass media, want of proper evaluation system.

There is a lack of proper strategy to addresses the post literacy and continuing education. The link between adult education programmes, livelihood and social awareness should be made stronger. The policy fails to take into account the intersectionality and social environment of campaign situations. Adult literacy policies such as the National Literacy Mission and Total Literacy Campaign need to be revised, with specified targets to reach out to the underprivileged women. The unpredictability regarding the funding is the primary reason for the loss of momentum in the current programmes. The funding available for the adult education programs is minimal. The allocation for adult learning is only 0.02% of the education budget (Ghose, 2007). The non-formal education programmes for the disadvantaged groups and marginalised women hardly receive attention. Some of the special provisions made for women's education such as National Programme for Women's Education are now combined with Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, which is the framework for universalised elementary education. The scope for women's adult education programmes has been reduced further.

The emphasis on the scheduled tribe, lower caste women and women from other minorities is missing in practice, and the programmes are developed considering women as a homogenous group. A critical adult education can lead towards self-sufficiency, independence and sustainable development for the subaltern women. Government policies and the civil society programmes that are working towards the empowerment of marginalised women have to establish a link between adult education activities, literacy and other development issues like health, continuing education, environment, local administration, micro-enterprises, etc.

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