Literacy, Power and Feminism

The politics of literacy and education has thus far remained a marginal concern for the women's movement in India with little effort made to address power issues that form part of the education process. Concerns over ensuring quality in education that are limited to skill improvement and enhancing the learning environment all too easily overlook that educational arenas create boundaries that limit possibilities and reinforce stereotypes, especially long-standing patriarchal constructs. This paper describes three diverse teaching/learning environments that formed part of a women's empowerment programme in a UP district in a bid to examine the way power relations reproduce and transform themselves in literacy programmes, which consciously attempt an empowering and participatory pedagogy.

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I
Introduction

The process of learning to read and write involves considerably more than the acquisition of a skill. For poor rural women literacy can become an arena where the structures of power encounter the possibilities of contested negotiation and critical reflection – a space inscribed with issues of power – and one where identities and knowledge are constructed, where women's everyday experiences form the basis for understanding and renegotiating the world. It is a matter of recognising and taking power over some aspects of language, literacy, and life. In a word, empowerment.

Ironically, while these issues have long been critical for feminists, the politics of literacy and education remains a marginal concern for the women's movement in India. There has been little effort made to address the issues of power that emerge out of and within the practice of education. This is particularly striking in the light of the literacy campaigns of the late 1980s and 1990s which saw a massive mobilisation of women. Similarly, in the ongoing debates around the NCERT National Curriculum Framework, the voices of women's groups have been noticeably absent, even though the framework is clearly antithetical to several issues that have been central to the struggles of the women's movement. Recent policy documents on primary education see women's roles in education as mobilisers – mothers who must play the role of bringing their children to school – the state's vision of women's education is very apparent but has not been adequately critiqued. However, when the findings of the Census 2001 announced the increase in female literacy

rates and the fact that female literacy rates were rising faster than male, this was widely highlighted as an indicator of an improvement in women's status.

This is hardly surprising as the primary focus of groups that do work on education is on access – issues such as, increasing enrolment of girls and arresting the drop-out rates. The state too, responds to this lack by focusing on delivery. Once women and girls have entered the 'public sphere', it is assumed that empowerment will follow implicitly. Their life options will expand and they will be in a position to take greater control of their lives. Concerns regarding quality are raised, but are usually limited to improving 'skills' and making the learning environment enjoyable and interactive so that learning achievements improve. But the reality is that the education spaces themselves create boundaries that limit possibilities and reinforce stereotypes. The curricula, including the content, language, images of textbooks, as well as the perceptions and attitudes of teachers have the power to strengthen the hold of patriarchal constructs. The educational arena becomes an enclosed space, like the 'domestic sphere', where discriminations are normalised and silenced. The challenge lies in seizing that space to articulate, critique and renegotiate these discriminations.

This paper uses the experiences of Nirantar,[1] a resource centre for gender and education, while working with Mahila Samakhya[2] (hereafter MS), a women's empowerment programme in Banda district of Uttar Pradesh to discuss the reproduction and transformation of power relations in certain literacy learning situations. An examination of how power dynamics play themselves out in literacy programmes, which consciously attempt

an empowering and participatory pedagogy forms the focus of this paper. The analysis of power structures and dynamics at play in literacy work is based on reports of three teaching/learning environments – a residential literacy camp, a participatory primer development workshop, and a six-month residential educational course for rural women.[3] These are of course 'micro' examples, but the issues they throw up certainly have larger implications, and I hope this discussion will help to establish the need for the women's movement to engage proactively with education policies at a macro level.

II
Literacy and Power

Our Approach to Literacy Work

As feminist literacy practitioners, we believe that education is not neutral, nor does our work entail merely delivering certain skills – such as literacy – to women. Our concern has been explicitly with changing power relations at a social and individual level. We are also bound to a pedagogy, which sees process and consequence as part of the same continuum, and to a belief that for women to feel empowered as a result of an engagement with education, they must be empowered within the educational practice.

Having said this, we should add that the working understanding of power used in empowerment programmes such as ours, draws on dichotomous categories like 'powerful and powerless', and images of 'grabbing power', 'redistributing power', and the like, all of which suggest an understanding of power as a finite commodity. We appreciate the limitations of this approach, but we also find it a valid

entry point to discussions when we are interacting with women who relate to the concept of power as something lacking in their own lives, and an asset of their oppressors.

On the other hand, our practice is also informed by a view of power at another level of definition: we see power as a phenomenon of structured but mutable social relationships, in patriarchy for example [Street 1995]. This vision of power is elegantly stated by Issac:

The exercise of power is always contingent, it is chronically negotiated in the course of everyday life…Thus power relations approximate less a model of stimulus and response, and more a model of endemic reciprocity, negotiation, and struggle, with both dominant and subordinate groups mobilising their specific powers and resources (and for the subordinate solidarity is always the greatest resource) [Issac 1986].

Such an analysis of power, which encompasses elements of both approaches, has been at the core of feminism, as have issues of knowledge and representation, authority and subordination, victimhood and agency, construction of subjectivities, and, above all, a concern for the everyday realities of women's lives. The concept of empowerment too – though now a buzzword – has been crucial in problematising the issue of power and bringing a theoretical construct within the realm of practice. Our work has its antecedents in this process.

The complexities and contradictions in the approach to literacy closely resemble our understanding of power outlined above. Thus, just as on the one hand we accept power as a concrete asset or a lack, we have also found ourselves treating (or being forced to treat) literacy and education as a concrete asset which we must 'deliver' to those lacking it. Then again, we also treat power as a more abstract, contingent, and open-ended phenomenon and we try to bring the same openness to our literacy work. The tension between these two broad perspectives of power and education is probably one of the more striking feature that emerges in the experiences narrated below. There are however, other threads running through these episodes. The power dynamics within the programme – between 'us' and 'them', 'teachers' and 'participants', and the power dynamics that are created between the programme and the external environment – between the 'mainstream' and 'alternative' and 'national' and 'local'. This was an area fraught with

contradictions, a situation we tried to get past but also had to accept.

III
Experiences from the Field

The Context

As the women's issue came to the centre stage of the 'development' arena in the 1980s in India, a number of empowerment programmes for women were formulated. Some were programmes mooted by the government. The women's movement through protest, lobbying, and critiquing patriarchal structures and institutions, had created an 'alternative space' in the previously forbidden terrain of government programmes. Partnerships between women's groups and government agencies, previously unthinkable, began to be forged. As women's groups attempted to translate feminist constructs into concrete programmes of action, there was a shift from looking at power as simply a negative or coercive force to regarding it as a generative, transformative and productive force as well [Batliwala 1993]. These programmes became spaces to introduce a different culture of power. MS was a product of this period.

The MS programme works on issues of women's education and empowerment. Banda, the MS district that is the focus of this paper, is one of the poorest districts in India, with a significant tribal and low-caste population, low literacy levels, and a high degree of violence towards women. Women's demand for literacy grew out of their involvement with issues like struggles against landlords and forest contractors, health and water. A particularly innovative effort was training illiterate rural women as hand-pump mechanics. It was born out of a need to redress the water scarcity in the region and a non-functioning government water department. This intervention has had a number of spin-offs – a growing demand for literacy, the acquisition of new skills like masonry, and a demand for information. All these efforts have been built on a bedrock of women's understanding of their life situation – their subordination, as well as strengths. Literacy was gradually seen as a skill that would enable women to deal with their environment from a position of strength. For the activists at the village level, their new roles as village activists demanded that they interact with the bureaucracy, schools, and other mainstream institutions on a regular basis. The women hand-pump mechanics needed

literacy for specific reasons: to maintain records of spare parts, other repairs, depths of bores, etc. The demand for literacy was linked to women re-defining their lived realities – which now included learning new skills, interacting with mainstream structures of power, greater mobility and self-confidence, and the desire for information on a range of issues.

Initially, the articulation of this demand compelled the programme functionaries to quickly get into the act of 'delivering literacy'. The education team consisted of a few 'sahayoginis'[4] and teachers called 'sahelis'. The formal schooling levels of the sahelis, compared to the educational qualifications of teachers in general, were low, though most had completed their primary education. This is an area where literacy levels for women are abysmally low and it was often difficult to find even a single literate woman in some villages. However, each new intervention led to an evolution of the team's (and our) skills and perspective on education. The group began to consider literacy to be instrumental to the development of a critical understanding of their life world, their experiences of struggle, of joy, as well as their folklore, language, and indigenous ways of knowing. On the other hand, education for many continued to be equated with knowledge, power, jobs, and the path to a better life.

Politics of Language: An Experience from a Literacy Camp

Literacy camps are residential programmes that initiate women into the world of letters. Through the use of locally relevant key words, discussion, and creation of learner-generated texts, these literacy camps provide a supportive learning atmosphere that helps dispel women's initial lack of confidence about being able to read and write. Since 1990 a number of such camps were held in Banda. A literacy course consisted of a series of three residential camps. Each camp lasted 10 days with a month-long break between each. Nirantar members were involved in evolving an appropriate teaching/learning methodology and training the local team.

What follows is an experience from one such literacy camp. Two sahayoginis, a group of sahelis, and a facilitator from Nirantar were coordinating this camp.

Durga (a sahayogini) began writing the names of the months on chart paper. As she wrote 'Chait' the women in her group read out 'Chaiyat'; she wrote 'Baisaakh'

they read 'Bayeesaakh'. This continued for a while. I wondered if this was a problem of differences in pronunciation. Or could it be that they were just reading incorrectly. It soon struck me that the sahelis had written the names of the month in standard Hindi and what the women (even some sahelis) were reading aloud was in Bundeli – the local language – the language of all oral communication in the area. I posed a question to the sahelis – would it not be simpler to write 'Chaiyat' instead?

There were a flood of protests – 'Chaiyat' was not 'proper' or 'correct'. 'But you speak it?' I inquired. One saheli said, "We are teachers, how can we teach them incorrectly? When the women return to their villages their books will be scrutinised by family members and others in the community, like the pradhan (village headman). It will reflect badly on us and the programme". Said another, "Besides they were learning to read and write to be able to access information. All calendars were written in standard Hindi". I was in a quandary. If 'Chaiyat' is how they say it, how they identify with it, they should write it as such. But in the face of such strong protest, could I push my views, it will not be what they want. But then I thought, 'Chait' for that matter was 'incorrect'; the 'proper' (sanskritised) Hindi word is 'Chaitra'. In fact that is how it is written in most calendars. When I pointed this out to the sahelis, they said that while they were familiar with 'Chaitra' it would be too difficult for the women to learn and pronounce.

On that occasion the women learned to write 'Chait'.

(From the diary of a Nirantar member, November 1993)

The 'Chaiyat', 'Chait', 'Chaitra' incident might appear trivial to some, especially as the words are so close – 'Chait' and 'Chaiyat' do not sound very different – but it threw up a number of issues. Questions of power were central to this. Who decides what is 'correct' and what is not? As we had seen, the boundaries between the regional language and standard Hindi were not as clear as we had initially assumed. As 'trainers' we could have pulled rank on the sahelis and insisted on Chaitra being taught. Or we could have ignored their need to access the mainstream and insisted on their learning the months in the local language – the language they identify with.

Decisions on language policies in the formal education system are made without consulting people, but the issue of language in the non-formal system, where there is flexibility is not given serious consideration. Decisions are either not taken, implying that the dominant language is used de facto, or at the most a 'transitional

approach' is adopted where the regional or local language is used as a bridge to ultimately take the learner towards learning the mainstream language.

The sahelis, despite the local inflections in their own Hindi, saw themselves as 'teachers' representing positions of authority and as providers of information. They were worried that this position would be open to question by other mainstream institutions. They had low levels of education, and would not have been accepted as 'teachers' in a formal context. But having become teachers, they had acquired a certain social standing, and they quickly stepped into their roles.

The contradiction lies in the fact that they are aware that in other areas of the programme primacy is given to women's ways of knowing and forms of expression. Yet when it came to literacy, the sahelis became sticklers for formality and purity. They also felt that they needed validation from the community for something as small as writing the name of the months, despite their involvement in processes which question this 'authority' in much more direct and visible ways.

Episodes like this forced us to deal with the issue of language in literacy teaching. While the verbal teaching/learning transaction was done in Bundeli, the actual words being taught and the texts being created were in Hindi. Was this instrumental approach to the local language limiting the women's creativity, inhibiting expression and communication of their thoughts and experiences? Was this approach, thereby, making invisible the women's culture and ways of defining and categorising their lifeworld? If this was so, then it was our limitation in not knowing the local language. We were Hindi-speaking people. However, the situation was not really all that simple. Hindi symbolised the language of power; the women themselves perceived their language as inferior. It was, they said, a 'dehati' (rustic), 'lath maar bhasha' (rough and ready language) – a poor alternative to Hindi. Bundeli had no credibility – a reflection of the inferiority they experience vis-a-vis their caste, class, and gender identities.

Three broad categories of power structures came into play in this incident. At a macro level, we see the process through which dominant values, specifically dominant national languages, enforce their hegemony. It is interesting of course that literacy lends itself to this process. That is, the norms of correctness are applied to spelling but not to pronunciation. Second,

there is an appeal to the power structures of the educational system. Although this incident occurred in an apparently alternative educational system, expectations of what teachers should teach and learners learn were clearly derived from the mainstream system. Finally, the incident expresses some of the power dynamics between the trainers and the sahelis. In this case, the trainers intervened to question the teacher's literacy practice. While we did not enforce any change, the intervention itself opened the issue for negotiation later.

Language, Pedagogy and Knowledge Creation – Process of Developing a Literacy Primer

We decided to develop a new primer for the programme. Having a primer that the women identify with, one that reflected the beliefs of the programme was felt to be important. A group of 10-12 sahelis and sahayoginis and members from Nirantar got together to develop a primer through a series of participatory workshops. Developing the primer threw up some important power-related issues of a participatory process of materials production. The incidents described below will highlight the issues around language hierarchies and knowledge creation, between oral and written language, literacy pedagogy and participatory processes.

Tackling language hierarchies
At the outset the following exchange occurred:
Facilitator (F): In what language should your primer be?
The responses of the participants (P) varied but were unanimously in favour of Hindi:
P: It should not be in the local language.
P: We speak our language, there is nothing new in it, so why teach in Bundeli?
P: If we teach them in their language they will remain where they are.
P: How will they read other books if they are taught only in Bundeli?
P: We should teach only the pure and correct form – both in the written and oral mode.

We felt differently. Language in literacy work was not merely a conduit to pass messages from a group of information providers to passive recipients. While we could not disregard the participants' strong notions of and aspirations for mainstream education, we felt that education work in the local language should at least be experimented with. Still, their strong, articulation in favour of Hindi put us in a dilemma. Could we push our agenda? After all, we were committed to a 'participatory' approach. Finally, drawing on the same

methodology, we reasoned that it would be unfair if we were not able to find the space to express our views. We thought it necessary to make explicit the issues of power within the question of language.

We decided that a dialogue on the issue was in order. We told the group we wanted to challenge their notions of purity and correctness in the context of language. This proved to be a difficult exercise. We raised with the group issues about the politics of language and the asymmetry of power that exists in the Indian context between the use of standardised (official) languages like Hindi and regional languages and local dialects. We, tried, through numerous illustrations to bring home the point that language was a means to exercise control and domination, as well as self-determination, and a strong cultural expression. While they relate to the concept of 'power' or 'paua' (as they refer to it) and experience it – viz, the landlords, upper castes, and as women, it was difficult for them to do so within the context of language.

Not having made any headway we decided to explore the issue differently rather than drop it completely. To not make explicit the various dimensions of subordination of Bundeli would have been to perpetuate unequal power relations. We undertook an exercise where we developed word lists in Bundeli in certain categories – items found in the house including architectural terms; kinship patterns; different idioms and qualities related to men, women, and children; adjectives used for different types of personalities, jewellery items, etc. The corresponding words in Hindi and English were written alongside. This exercise generated excitement. Every word brought with it an outpouring of stories – intensely personal, but also humorous and satirical; "they used to tell me not to laugh like that …my mother got these kinds of earrings made when I got married…they used to shout and call him a 'belli' (nut)…the milk used to be hidden in this kind of cupboard…" Though each story, even around the same word, was different, they all shared a common cultural experience. Experiences, from which we were excluded, but became a part of, in the narration. Our interest somehow seemed to affirm their experiences and the stories kept flowing. (Excerpts from the workshop report)

The process revealed a wealth of indigenous cultural experiences and the richness of the local language while simultaneously inverting the power dynamics between Nirantar members and the sahelis. For instance, the group found that there were words in Bundeli that had no equivalent in Hindi. English was able to capture even fewer nuances. In English you have only uncle and aunt, in Hindi there are special terms for every kind of uncle or aunt; your father's sister is 'bua', and mother's sister is 'maasi'; and Bundeli is even more nuanced. Each term carries connotations of a unique relationship. In other categories too there were Bundeli words that found no place in Hindi. If these words were not within the mainstream language should they be deleted from our vocabulary as well? Were these words 'incorrect'? As the discussion flowed the group decided that they would settle for a mix of Hindi and Bundeli.

This exercise brought into focus the following issues. First, that writing, unlike speech, calls for the authorised version. Second, new learners and their teachers are faced with this issue of power and who has the right to say how something will be written.

Participatory Writing Process: The Complexities Involved

So far so good. But the next day when we attempted to build on this fruitful exercise we were in for a surprise.

On the basis of the previous day's exercise we asked them to select key words and create reading texts. They wrote: 'Minu fetch water', 'Ramu go to the fields', 'Rita cook the food'. Everything was an instruction. The readers were passive receivers. We took their work and read it back to them. They looked unmoved. We asked them, where was the laughter and animation of the previous day? If we had enjoyed the stories so much could that not then form part of their primer? They said, "But then we were 'telling' the story. Those kinds of stories are never in books. We never thought they were worth anything much". "But then you never wrote books before", we replied. "Now you will, so you can put what you want into them".

It is evident from this incident that there was a sharp distinction in the women's minds between what is appropriate for oral and for written communication. While indigenous language and images find reflection in the oral mode, literacy and the written mode is concerned with instructions, development, and information, and always reflects the images and perceptions of the mainstream language. We felt we had to intervene again to make the group realise that they had the power to shape the primer as they chose, to include their images and content. The conflicting images of that content held by teachers and learners had to be reconciled. It was a realisation of the power they would wield,

as well as the potential power to change and redefine what counts as knowledge. To make the alternative possible we had to first validate their language and cultural experiences and establish that language was central to knowledge creation. And it was not insignificant that the validation was coming from us- people who to them represented the mainstream.

How Did We Select What to Include in the Primer?

When it came to making a selection, a majority of the group suggested one of the denial stories. But we felt very strongly that selecting that story would only reinforce the stereotypical relationship between a mother-in-law and young bride which is usually portrayed as being tense, strained, and one of restriction and denial. Was it not possible to present a more humorous side to women's and young girls' lives?

In the previous day's exercise they had listed Bundeli words for architectural features within their houses. One such feature was a special cupboard called a 'kimaria', where all the precious 'goodies' – like extra milk or ghee or some sweets – would be stored. Numerous stories had been narrated about the kimaria. Most of them had to do with women or young girls being denied access to the kimaria. One story was slightly different. It was about how one of the sahayoginis as a young girl was caught stealing milk from the kimaria. It was humorous, used the local idiom, and had caused much merriment in its narration. This type of story was finally selected for the primer. Although many of the books available portray young girls as being burdened with work and discriminated against, we emphasised that every time we present a story (written or oral) we are implicated in a particular way of understanding the world and our place in it [Simon 1987]. Do we then always want to produce narratives that represent women as 'victims' – denied, burdened, and discriminated against?

Maniya's Story: When Real Events Become Materials for Texts

As we were working on the primer that evening some women from the office rushed into the room saying, "A young woman, Maniya, has been burnt to death by her husband. A group of us are going to Manikpur (a nearby town) to try and catch him". We all dropped our work and prepared to leave with them. No one needed any prompting.

A group of about 15 women reached Manikpur. We gathered the women of Maniya's neighbourhood and began having a meeting. All of a sudden the dead women's husband appeared – dressed in white, feigning a deep sense of loss at his wife's death. He thought we had come to pay a condolence visit. But the women were in no mood to be taken in by his deceit. We accused him of the crime. He denied having committed it. The women did not relent. He finally admitted that he was guilty, but with no hint of remorse or shame. We were enraged and started beating him. We painted his face black, made him wear a garland of slippers, and paraded him through the town.

On returning to the workshop everyone started writing out the story as a lesson in the primer. There had been no consultation. The key word selected for the lesson was 'chadchatta' (a deceitful, fraudulent person), a word in Bundeli that had emerged in the previous day's exercise. They were convinced that no other word could describe the man. (From Nirantar's workshop report.)

The primer workshop experience revealed an interesting sequence of events. Here the Nirantar members were obviously quite forceful in pushing the women to affirm their local tongue. But after the apparent success in generating a lively discussion on the joys of Bundeli, this momentum floundered the next day because of the deeply ingrained association of literacy with the national language and what is worthy of being in a book. Yet it was finally the intervention of 'everyday life' or at least a common tragedy that shook the women into a realisation of the virtues of their own language. This episode also revealed to us the virtues and limitations of 'classroom exercises'. The classroom discussion while creative and important did not seem to have any concrete significance for the women. But after the cathartic experience of punishing Maniya's husband, the women spontaneously drew on their vernacular for what clearly an empowering act – that of labelling the murderous husband. It is, however, unlikely that this would have happened had the discussions not moved outside the language exercise.

Politics Around Ways of Knowing: Experiences from a Six-Month Residential Course

The women and adolescent girls who had acquired basic literacy skills at the literacy camps and centres articulated a strong demand for further education. A six-month

residential course at the Mahila Shikshan Kendra (Women's Learning Centre) began in January 1995 to meet this demand. The example below is drawn from the first course at the Mahila Shikshan Kendra (MSK). It was during this period that the curriculum for the course was developed collaboratively by Nirantar, MS Banda, and the 28 participants. How do different belief systems and ways of seeing the world impact upon an educational process? This issue came up starkly in certain sessions but was an underlying concern throughout.

Are Rivers and the Earth Living or Non-living?

During one of the sessions in the MSK devoted to looking at different ways of categorising, the participants were categorising the world around them into 'living' and 'non-living'. The lesson progressed smoothly till they came to classifying soil and river. The participants classified both as living. The sahelis too believed this. There was a moment of confusion as the MS resource person present had a niggling feeling of doubt. A science textbook she had read had classified soil as non-living. But the sahelis were not persuaded.

That afternoon two members from Nirantar came to the MSK. On hearing about the morning's sessions they expressed concern; it was factually incorrect to classify river and soil as living. A hasty meeting was convened. The sahelis defended their position. They eventually referred to the background material that had been given to them by Nirantar, which said, "jaise hamare sharer ko hava, pani, aur khana, takat badane ke liye zaroori hota hain, vaise mitti ko bhi zinda rehne ke liye in sab ki zaroorat hoti hai" (Just as human beings require air, water, and food to keep alive, soil too requires the above). The lifelike quality attributed to soil was a turn of phrase, and not to be taken literally. For the sahelis it only served to reinforce what they already believed. We defended our position by checking both soil and river against the listed characteristics of living things. They did not fit. Science textbooks were referred to. The sahelis fell silent. We decided to reopen the discussion and try and rectify things.

> Intervenors (1): Which of you think that soil and rivers are living? All the learners (except one) raised their hands. Why do you think they are living?
> Participants (P): River is our 'devi' (goddess) and 'dharti' (earth) is our mother.
> I: Your real mother is living. Earth and

rivers are mother images, not your real mother.
P: They both give life – our grain, plants, forests grow in soil. Rivers give us life-giving water. Our mothers give life.
I: It is true that they are life supporting but that does not mean they are living themselves. We eat food and grains to live but the grain itself is not living. They do not grow. They do not procreate.
P: But if soil did not have life it would not produce life. Rivers grow. They grow in the monsoons and shrink in the summers. They do give birth to other rivers.
Chamela, a learner, challenged her colleagues: A river is non-living because rivers dry up in the summer. Something living cannot periodically live and die.
P: River is a mother and mothers can have many children. If one child dies do we say all other are dead or that the mother is dead? Earth is our mother and earth drinks water.
I: But a piece of cloth also soaks water, it is not living.
I: What is a river made of?
P: Water
I: Is water living?
P: Water in a glass is not living but a river is living. A river is living because it flows, it moves, it cuts it own course.
I: You are saying that soil is living, but is this (holding up a lump of soil) living?
P: No, in this form it is not living but the earth is living. Gods and goddesses give birth to rivers. Earth is a goddess. We pray to them.
I: That is a matter of your belief. Your religion. Other religions or belief systems may not accept this. For instance, scientists believe that they are non-living. Every one is free to have their own beliefs and that is nice. The logic you put forward holds for the way you look at the world and similarly the logic within the other system is consistent.

This interaction, very early on in the semester, compelled us to reflect on our practice. There was a distinct polarisation between the way we categorised the world and their ways of looking or knowing. The interaction described above pitted one belief system against the other. However, the manner in which the interaction unfolded, with us trying to counter every point they made with a different logic, was not fruitful. The two systems really had no basis for comparison. And though we gave value to their ways of seeing, we did try and uphold a scientific, positivist conception of knowledge. Categories such as living and non-living had been emphasised as 'scientific' and 'logical', and the task of teaching and learning had to do with the acquisition of 'universal', neutral content.

Yet the situation was not simply about imposing our worldview and disregarding

theirs. And the episode in many ways was a dialogue among equals. Learners, till the end, were far from convinced that the categorisation we were trying to suggest had any value or validity. Their beliefs that earth and river are 'goddesses', 'life-giving', and 'mother' could not be separated or broken down into components such as "river is made of water and water is non-living". The power and meaning that river and earth hold in their life world is too great and too integral to their existence. 'Humanising' or giving things human attributes was also integral to the participants' language use – branches are children, sap is blood, when you cut a tree it bleeds, and the rustling of the leaves when a tree or branch is being cut, are cries of pain.

Divorcing this language use when trying to categorise is also not possible. Cultural roots are far more resistant and educational interventions cannot wipe these out so quickly or simply. Furthermore, the dangers of negating the learners' life world are immense. Most education programmes pay little attention, as we did on that occasion, to the connections that exist between knowledge and its practical, cultural, and linguistic realities in the learners' lives. Teaching and learning is not simply the acquisition of universal, neutral content; rather knowledge is an instrument of reflection and insight.

This stalemate was not the last word on the issue of living and non-living; the dialogue resurfaced on another occasion. The same group of women, when discussing how rivers are formed unhesitatingly declared that they are formed from melting snow of the mountains. This also brought home the fact that people are products of a complex reality, have different 'voices' [Wertsch 1991], and do not necessarily believe in 'one truth'. The voice that argues strongly for the river being a mother, living, a goddess, and created by gods, also believes that rivers are born from melting mountain snows. Both voices are equally real.

Some final questions arise: What made us include this in the curriculum? Why try and teach adult women categories like living and non-living? They already had well-defined ways of seeing and categorising. We realised that this decision was unconsciously determined by our own primary-level schooling, and not by any carefully thought out criteria. And indeed the distinction between living and non-living is one of the first lessons in most school textbooks. But then, if we did not bring in such topics would we be excluding them from a way of seeing shared with a large section of society? Such questions are important to raise and engage with to ensure that ones work is constantly evolving.

Conclusion

The three illustrative examples of teaching/learning activities raise important questions for people who are working in the area of education and literacy. One element that is clearly evident is that by engaging with the politics of language in literacy teaching one is also engaging with feminist politics. We saw through the examples that language plays a critical role in terms of constructing identities, determining what constitutes knowledge, ways of seeing the world and self-expression. We also saw that by challenging existing power hierarchies alternatives can be created. The examples also point to the need for greater engagement by women's groups with literacy and education in general and the politics of language in particular – the politics of standardised and local languages and their gender implications. How the perpetuation of this divide continues to keep women's experience and knowledge on the margins. Though the examples in this paper are limited to women's experiences in a non-formal educational programme, it is not difficult to see that there would be similar issues to grapple with in mainstream school education. There is a need to critically analyse the school textbooks from this perspective and see how language textbooks, for example, reinforce and create gendered identities or whose experiences find reflection.

The other element that runs through all these experiences is the tension that exists between the mainstream and the creation of an alternative. The experiences demonstrate that neither can we in our practice do away entirely with the mainstream, nor can we simply construct the 'other' in opposition to the mainstream. Negotiating between the two becomes crucial to the construction of a sustainable literacy intervention, where there is an integrated 'participation' of the two rather than mere substitution. This brings us back to our understanding of power, where the two notions of power – one as a commodity and the other as generated through structured relationships that are mutable – become part of this negotiation with marginalised groups who experience power only as a lack.

And lastly by defining education and literacy as empowering and describing our practice as 'participatory', we often do away with the uncomfortable question of power.

In the examples we attempt to unpack the concept of participation and demonstrate that we are constantly working in situations that are ridden with inequalities. An analysis of power in our daily practice becomes critical, as the teaching/learning situation is not a neutral one. It is a real material site of social relations. **EPW**

Notes

1 Nirantar, a Gender and Education resource centre, was set up in 1993. Our mandate, very briefly, is to make education an empowering process for women, particularly poor rural women. We work in close collaboration with field-based organisations to plan and implement education strategies, produce alternative curricula and reading material for newly literate adults, and conduct gender sensitisation trainings. We are involved with the autonomous women's movement and attempt to bring these concerns into our education work.

2 Mahila Samakhya or Education for Women's Equality is a central government programme of the department of education, ministry of human resources development. It was launched in 1989 in the states of Karnataka, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh, and has since expanded to cover several other states. Banda is one of the districts in Uttar Pradesh, where the programme was first launched. The programme was launched in pursuance of the National Policy on Education in 1986, which was the first policy-level expression of the belief that education can bring about changes in the status of women.

3 Several Nirantar members, including the author, were actively involved in the education work in Banda from 1991 to 1997. Nirantar's involvement with the gender training and other aspects of the programme provided the base for building a common understanding on education and women's empowerment with the MS team. The experiences described in this paper are drawn from our work during the period 1992 – 1995. At the time of writing this paper the MS programme in the district is functioning in a limited way in terms of its agenda and staff. The education programme, including the Mahila Shikshan Kendra is no longer operational.

4 Grass roots workers who coordinated the work of 10 villages.

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