

View from the Margins

Sociology of Education and Gender

Sociology has a major role to play in making sense of contemporary educational transformations, changes effecting women's lives and relating these to the processes of social, economic and cultural changes in the wider society. This article looks at educational processes and outcomes within economic and social transformations and locates gender within the field of sociology.

KARUNA CHANANA

In less than two decades, sociology will complete a century of its existence in the Indian universities. Eight decades are a sufficiently long time for any discipline to come of age and to reflect on its past, present and future. This is not the first time, though, that this exercise of reflection by the community of Indian sociologists is being undertaken. From time to time international and national associations of sociologists have been concerned with the development and growth of sociology in India. The trend reports written by Ramakrishna Mukherjee (1979) and Yogendra Singh (1986) at the instance of International Sociological Association and published in *Current Sociology* in the 1970s and 1980s reflected this concern. The Indian Council for Social Science Research¹ (ICSSR) and the University Grants Commission² (UGC) have also commissioned surveys of sociology and social anthropology in India.³

This paper refrains from undertaking a similar exercise. Instead it focuses on the interface between education and gender, and their place in sociology along with the need for training in research methodology, i.e., the craft of sociology. For the last three decades my interest has intersected between education and gender within the larger field of sociology. Both require an interdisciplinary orientation. Both occupy the margins of sociology as an academic discipline. Both are softer options within the social sciences and both are the chosen first options of women as students and for employment. This paper is being written against the backdrop of the changing and increasing emphasis on the criticality of

education, and of the social and economic transformations due to globalisation and liberalisation and the accompanying shifts in the educational system. It refers to the contexts and policies that have shaped educational change over recent decades, through an engagement with sociological perspectives. The paper locates educational processes and outcomes within economic and social transformations. It revisits issues of quality, inequality and social justice and engages with contemporary research and policy debates about the role of education in post-independent India. The next section locates gender within the field of education, sociology and anthropology. The third section focuses on methodological concerns leading to change in the methods of social research in general and how they relate to educational research. The remaining sections embed these discussions within the frame of sociology.

Education and women's studies have been given space in the social sciences generally and in sociology specifically because of societal pressures emanating from critical social and political forces such as the critique of development and the emergence of the women's movement. For instance, the women's movement in the west brought women's issues to the centre of public discourse. They also brought in funds for social research and action and, therefore, the social sciences gave space to the study of women-related issues and problems. As a result teaching and research in women's studies was mostly fund-driven in the beginning. It caught on later because of the interest and commitment of scholars, mainly women. Education, too, has been lately very much

a part of the public discourse because of its close links with social development, human development and gender development. Thanks to the 'development' critique, education, especially primary education, has been brought to the centre stage of discussions relating to the 'development' of the not-so-developed countries or what are euphemistically called developing countries. On the other hand, globalisation and structural adjustment have impinged on the higher education system. It is being argued here that while both education and women's issues are critical social issues, they continue to remain marginal in sociology. One of the indicators is the space given to them in the undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Indian universities. I shall elaborate this point later.

Educational Change

Over the last five decades the role of education has been transformed and is constantly reviewed in the light of social development, human development and gender development. Indian society too has witnessed rapid social and institutional changes along with the emergent rhetoric of economic efficiency, globalisation and liberalisation. Under these circumstances, the role of formal education has also been challenged and it has assumed renewed and increased importance in search of economic and social renewal. A review of developments in education suggests that by the mid-1970s formal education appears to have failed in most of its missions, namely, in providing equality of opportunity and universal access. The 1980s saw education ready for reform and so the new educational policy was formulated in 1986. The rhetoric was of universal access and diversity. Education for women's equality and empowerment, decentralisation, etc., were adopted which were expected to alter the organisational and managerial structure and the distribution of educational provision. The 'reforms' of education in the post-liberalisation and globalisation phase in the 1990s were in part a response to wider concerns about the role of education driven by the post-globalisation economic imperatives. During this period a policy

consensus also seems to have emerged to some extent.⁴ Many aspects of educational change such as the new curriculum and the definition of knowledge, funding and educational management and the dual school system have remained areas of contention and conflict while some crucial areas such as equality and social justice have remained at the periphery of contemporary educational priorities. Hence education is being constantly critiqued while new agendas are being set for it.

The state supported system of education has been undergoing change especially in higher education due to privatisation and external funding in school education. These shifts have fundamentally altered the processes, outcomes and expectations from schooling. It is true that there has been a good deal of educational continuity in spite of change. For example, while there is much that is new (at least the hype is), viz, revised curricula and assessment procedures, teacher training programmes, a new promotional culture,⁵ – one has to still face the reality of the poor quality of the public school system, the gendered teacher careers, inequality in access and outcomes by caste, class and gender, school stratification, etc. Hence, change and continuity are simultaneous.

Sociology of Gender and Education?

I have been exploring the interface between the institutions of family and marriage, which fall in the private domain, and their impact on accessing education for girls and women, which fall in the public domain. The institutions of marriage and family have been traditionally researched by social anthropologists⁶ who undertake micro level, in-depth long-term ethnographic studies using qualitative tools of data collection. Education and employment, on the other hand, have been researched by the psychologists and educational researchers who undertake macro-level survey-based extensive studies at the local, national and international level [Chanana 1993: WS 26]. Anthropologists and sociologists have not been interested in the educational system generally and in the education of women specifically nor have they tried to link the social institutions to educational growth and development.⁷ More recently, issues relating to women's access to education, its growth and expansion, the type and level of education available to them have been re-

searched without paying attention to the familial and social context [Chanana 1988]. This is because educational researchers have generally overlooked the need to contextualise the institution of education within the family, kin group and society. This "academic division of labour had discouraged systematic investigation of the potentially powerful interrelationships between women's involvement in the formal educational system and indigenous traditional social institutions such as the joint family, dowry and arranged marriages, and purdah..." [Mukhopadhyay and Seymour 1993:2-3].

This lack of interest of educational researchers in the social context especially in the institutions of marriage and family and of sociologists and social anthropologists in education has created a hiatus such that the quality of research on gender⁸ and education is adversely affected. Those sociologists who have looked at gender and education are exceptions. They have tried to bridge the gap between the social context and educational growth and development. They have also tried to embed the discussions on women's education within social institutions and have highlighted the need for linking educational policies and programmes for girls and women within the social context [Chanana 1988; Chanana 2001; Minault 1998; Mukhopadhyay and Seymour 1993].⁹ These scholars have provided an understanding and a direction to the study of women's education. Yet, small-scale micro level in-depth studies focusing on the social context of the education of girls have remained scant.

As a result of this academic division of labour research into the interface between the social institutions of family, marriage, *parda*, on the one hand, and the macro and modern educational institutions such as education and employment have remained unexplored while the social reality has been undergoing a rapid change because the private and public domains have begun to intersect in the lives of educated Indian women.

Thus, it may not be off the mark to say that the body of scholarship on women's education within Indian sociology has not yet developed. Again, it has been generated by social scientists trained in education who are interested either in classroom problems and processes or in policy related macro level educational research. Lately, scholars interested in women's studies have also been looking at issues of access, achievement and school curriculum. Although they were generally trained

in the social sciences and were rooted in the theoretical perspectives their main focus was and has been on the practical aspects of women's issues and problems. The situation is also changing rapidly as these scholars are being replaced by those who are trained in the women's studies centres and departments without a specific social science disciplinary orientation. Recently, the situation has changed further due to international development agencies which have tried to push primary education on the agenda of the Indian government. This has brought in external funding in the area of education and the entry of NGOs on the scene.

The push factors that worked in favour of women's studies and sociology of women were: the women's movement,¹⁰ UN sponsorship of 1975 as the women's year and the ensuing national level state support. This support made available funds for research on women. The University Grants Commission established women's studies centres in the 1980s in several universities. Thus, in the last 25 years a considerable body of literature and knowledge has been generated. Interest in women has also given a push to empirical studies. In spite of the growth of feminist knowledge, sociologists view it with scepticism [Beteille 1994; Gupta 1996]. They are concerned that feminification of sociology will make it a softer intellectual and theoretical social science – as if sociology was not a softer social science before the emergence of women's studies.¹¹

Craft of Sociology

The last few decades have witnessed new developments in theory and methodology in the social sciences from which sociology is not untouched. Educational research has adopted new methodologies. Simultaneously, there has been a broadening of what is understood as education. These have challenged and changed the ways in which research is undertaken and represented, not least in educational studies. These have come about in response to the theoretical perspectives mentioned above and have started the process of rethinking and ways of doing research in education. Sociological research on education has been slow to respond to the new opportunities and has thus remained marginal.

At another level, the training of students in research methodology remains abysmal. Sociology students are admitted to our teaching programme from all parts of India. Most of them uniformly lack training in

methodology-quantitative as well as qualitative. It is not that the students are not interested but that they are not given the training. I must also mention that we admit students who have obtained master's degree in sociology,¹² psychology, economics and history. Compared to those who are trained in psychology, economics and history, the sociology students are the weakest. The others are trained well in their craft and also find it easy to learn other methodologies but the sociology students find it difficult to understand even the basics. This was the situation four decades ago and sadly remains the same. Not that the courses on research methods, methodology, techniques, social statistics, etc, are not listed in the teaching programmes of the departments of sociology. Most of them list two such courses as part of their MA programmes. Some list them for the undergraduate programmes as well. There are some departments in Indian universities which train their students in anthropological techniques and methods of fieldwork but they are also a dwindling tribe. This is what seems to have happened as a result of the blurring of the two disciplines. Or am I imagining things? Given the fact that nearly 1,00,000 undergraduates and 6,000 postgraduates pass out of the universities the catchment area is large [UGC 2001].

Here I would like to digress a bit to highlight the fact that students of sociology are keen to get exposure to the field at the MA and M Phil level. They eagerly await and demand to be taken out for a short stint of fieldwork. Perhaps, they also perceive this as a necessary precondition for jobs with the NGOs and the international development agencies. This attitude is in sharp contrast to their attitude toward fieldwork for doctoral research. In the perceptions of most of them, 2-3 months' fieldwork would suffice – that too using questionnaire based survey. Yet they do not know what is a survey and how to construct the instruments to be used for it.

This brings me to the next problem, i.e., the lack of applied orientation of sociology. I seem to be revisiting my past in revisiting that of the profession I belong to. We faced these dilemmas and problems as students and so do the students now. This is in spite of the fact that the situation on the ground has changed radically and the students are aware of the demands from outside the four walls of the classroom. Are we willing to accept the challenge and to expand our horizons? Sociology has

generally responded to the societal changes which are reflected in the curriculum and in the researchers [Sundaram 2000].

Challenge to Sociology of Education

The challenges of postmodernism and alternative perspectives offered by social movements such as feminism, dalit movement, education as a fundamental right, etc, have given a new thrust to interest in education, provided new perspectives on sociological analysis, led to a reformulated politics of identity and cultural difference by the dalits and women. The sociology curriculum, too, has changed and expanded in response to the emerging contours of a changing society. The surveys sponsored by the ICSSR and the UGC are reflective of the changes in the empirical reality and the corresponding changes in the research sites and the curriculum.

Sociologists of education have also been increasingly concerned with emerging educational problems, experiences and identities. They have been concerned with mapping and understanding the ways in which educational discourse shapes and is shaped by multiple social realities. Sociological questions about the relations between education, economy and society or structural relationships between education and other social institutions have been revisited. They have drawn on critical perspectives and qualitative research strategies to focus on the gendered, sexualised, castiest contexts of teaching and learning. They have also revisited issues of access, outcomes and schooling process.

In the words of Brown et al (1997: 13): "Whereas sociology of education was previously dominated by issues of access, selection and equality of opportunity, issues of knowledge, pedagogy and the politics of difference have assumed far greater significance in the study of education as a site of struggle. This reflects broader debates within the social sciences about postmodernism and the cultural politics of difference."

Thus, the limited contributions of sociologists working on education and on gender have undergone transformations, paralleling the changes that have taken place in their research sites. The public discourse on education and the challenges to the existing system have given rise to a sociologically informed research because more funds are available for policy oriented research as well as on access and outcomes.

Hence, sociological work on education has had to adapt to the changing demands on education. This change is reflected in the course syllabi of Indian universities.

The sociology panel of the University Grants Commission undertook the task of revising the NET syllabus.¹³ The UGC sent out a detailed questionnaire to all the universities seeking details of the courses offered under their undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Responses were received from 53 universities which sent their detailed syllabi. I scanned these course outlines to see how many had listed¹⁴ the courses on education and on women and gender. Very few universities (16) list sociology of education as a course either at the undergraduate or at the postgraduate level. Those which do, list it only as an optional course. The optional course on women or on gender is listed in the MA programmes of 18 universities.

The problem lies with the indifference of sociologists towards education generally and the mistrust of sociologists by educationists and those who frame policy. Given the relatively weak position of the sociology of education within the discipline more generally and the ways in which sociology has been systematically linked to purely academic, non-applied or soft perspectives, sociologists are also not welcome in the educational field. This has left the field wide open for others to step in as sociologists. They are called in by the policy planners to dwell on sociological issues and dimensions of education.¹⁵

(Re)positioning of Education in Sociology

The changes within education over recent decades have affected the place of sociology within education and the sociology of education as a sub-discipline. As mentioned earlier, pressure has been generated by marketisation and the increasing role of the private sector in higher education coupled with the entry of external funding in primary education which have led to policy shifts. Wide publicity has also been given to the problems of illiteracy, the non-functioning state supported school system, the exclusion of the marginal child from it and its reproductive role. While there is tension between policy and the social reality, the new policy shifts are also playing a significant part in a detheorising project. Educational research agendas are increasingly policy driven and are focused more on evaluation than on interpretation

and analysis. This has probably meant enhanced significance for sociological perspectives on education in general while it has not enhanced the academic significance of education to attract more sociologists to the field. This is in spite of the fact that the changes in the educational concerns have led to a remapping of this arena.

Women's studies, too, has expanded the landscape within which to look at issues relating to women. The dominant voices of patriarchy are reflected in increasing reports of violence against women, dowry deaths, breakdown of the family, the plight of the widowed mothers, son preference and the neglect of the aging parents. Simultaneously, the new spaces for women through education and employment, their entry into different arenas are also indicators of the changed landscape. Therefore, as new issues and challenges have arisen they have generated new areas of research and analysis. These have set new agendas and generated new questions for the sociology of education.

One may take village studies as an example to illustrate the radical shifts that

have taken place in the ground reality and why it is necessary to expand the parameters of traditional core areas of teaching and research in sociology. The Indian village and the caste system initiated us into the world of sociology in the 1960s. These continue to be critical even today yet the contours of both have changed so radically that a student will have to know the shifts that have taken place and the factors that have caused these shifts. The urbanised village of today presents a much more complex picture than perhaps the rural one. We are also aware that education will have to be looked at by any researcher to see whether it has been an instrument of social mobility or not. Has it played an equalising role for dalits and women or not? What are the issues that surround the education of girls and the marginal children? The village studies of today will be quite different and the tools needed to grasp this complex reality will also have to be varied. In fact, a village without a school will be as much, if not more than, of sociological significance as a village with a school.

Moreover, higher education system is in a flux since it is becoming market-driven; the state is withdrawing from it; the higher educational institutions are being pushed into raising funds which are getting linked to performance and accountability. While performance and accountability are imperative in colleges and universities which had absolved themselves of these responsibilities under state patronage, yet we need to ask – should universities be perceived as generators of wealth alone? Is industry going to draw up the agenda of higher education and research? Will humanities and social sciences continue to be marginalised because they are not market driven? The 1990s have been critical in raising issues related to primary education and to higher education and in changing the perception about education and its functions. The role of education of girls and women within the larger system have also been in the forefront. The pressures were generated by the international community and reinforced by the civil society here. Contemporary sociology of education has not responded to these challenges

and has failed to place itself within broader disciplinary contexts and social movements.

New Directions for Sociology of Education

As a social process, education focuses on the reproduction of knowledge and sociological perspectives can further the understanding of the educational problems by locating this understanding within the context of social change. On the other hand, changes in social, political and economic life are reflected in the educational shifts and reforms. Since education is central to cultural reproduction, social and economic regeneration, any repositioning of the educational system can be of immense sociological significance. For instance, the burden of illiteracy, the criticality of universal elementary education, the emphasis on accountability, the linking of the higher education content to market demands and shifting labour market needs are playing a role in rethinking the aims and outcomes of education as well as on the role of the state in education. On the other hand, at the theoretical level, conceptualisations of the family, sexuality, development and education have been questioned and reformulated – within and outside the educational space. Thus, major developments are taking place for sociology not to remain a mere spectator to these and to incorporate education and gender in programmes of studies both at the undergraduate and at the postgraduate levels. Apart from research implications, these changes have pedagogical implications. For instance, they should be given space in the core courses on Indian society, Indian social institutions, etc, several of which are offered at the undergraduate and postgraduate level by all the universities. They cannot and should not be ignored as being too practical and not worth theoretical orientation.

In the past few decades, sociology has been transformed by new perspectives and theorising offered by postmodernism, post-structuralism, feminism, cultural studies and post-colonialism. Sociology of education and of gender have also adapted these theoretical frameworks. As a discipline, sociology is primarily concerned with documenting, explaining and understanding social processes and social change. New policy agendas have thrown up new research priorities as well as re-examined persistent problems of educational access and educational stratification, equality and social justice, reproduction of knowledge,

pedagogy and educational processes. Now, more than ever before, there is need to look at the educational field closely and give it more space within sociology.

Sociology has a major role to play in making sense of contemporary educational transformations, changes affecting women's lives and relating these to the processes of social, economic and cultural change in the wider society. It also has a responsibility to train and equip the future sociologists with the craft of understanding social reality and be ready to observe it. How long can education and gender be treated as the 'other' or remain on the margins of sociology? [27]

Notes

[Invited paper presented at the Symposium 'The State of the Profession: Indian Sociology-Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow' at the XXVII All India Sociological Conference held at the Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar from December 26-27, 2001.]

- 1 These surveys were undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s. The most recent survey, which covers the period 1980-87, has just been published [Gore 2000].
- 2 The sociology panel of the UGC also undertook surveys of the sociology curriculum with a focus on updating the teaching courses in higher education.
- 3 The ICSSR focuses on research while the main focus of UGC surveys is teaching. Therefore, the former provides a comprehensive picture of the research themes and areas covered during the period under survey. The latter, on the other hand, gives a comprehensive picture of the courses being offered and those that could be offered in the future.
- 4 The fact that the present government has not tried to revise the policy unlike the earlier government which revised NPE 1986 in 1992 is an indicator of the policy consensus. This is notwithstanding the effort of the present government to change the curriculum of the schools.
- 5 The launching of the Probe report (*Public Report on Basic Education in India*, Oxford, New Delhi, 1999) by Amartya Sen, brought in the necessary publicity to the survey of primary education although none of the findings were new or earth shaking for those who had been working in the area of primary education for several years.
- 6 In India, the distinction between sociology and social anthropology is not very distinct, yet it is also not entirely absent. This is reflected in the methodology used by the students of sociology and social anthropology.
- 7 The 1960s and 1970s saw an interest in the social background of students in higher education.
- 8 I am using the word gender interchangeably with women notwithstanding the lack of agreement about the usage of the word gender in the context of women's studies. I am also refraining from entering into the details of the debate surrounding these two words [for this see Chanana 2001:23-26].
- 9 These days policy makers, NGOs and activists have been talking about these aspects and the use of the word sociological has become very

common in discussions and debates on education.

- 10 Notwithstanding the lack of agreement about whether there was a women's movement in India or not
- 11 In the second year of its establishment, the department of sociology at Delhi University had 12 students in the first year of MA in the batch of 1960-62. Of these 6 were women and six men. Even now women students continue to be present in substantial numbers in the departments of sociology.
- 12 Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, where I teach, runs an MPhil programme in Educational Studies. It is an interdisciplinary centre in the School of Social Sciences. The doctoral programme offers specialisations in the sociology of education, economics of education, psychology of education and history of education.
- 13 NET stands for National Eligibility Test. This All-India examination is conducted twice a year by the UGC to test the eligibility of postgraduates to become college and university teachers. It also selects students for research fellowships for doctoral degree.
- 14 I am intentionally making a distinction between listing and offering a course.
- 15 Sociologists have been rarely involved in the policy and planning process. This is evident from their absence in the organisations and bodies that are involved in these processes.

References

- Beteille, Andre (1994): 'Feminism in Academia', *The Times of India*, December 27.
- Brown, P, A H Halsey, H Lauder and Wells A Stuart (1997): 'The Transformation of Education and Society: An Introduction' in A H Halsey et al (eds), *Education: Culture, Economy, Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Chanana, Karuna (ed) (1988): *Socialisation, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*, Orient Longman, Delhi.
- (1993): 'Partition and Family Strategies: Gender-Education Linkages among Punjabi Women in Delhi', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 (17), April 24, pp WS 25-34.
- (2001): *Interrogating Women's Education: Bounded Visions, Expanding Horizons*, Rawat Publishers, Jaipur.
- Gore, M S (ed) (2000): *Third Survey of Research in Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 2 volumes, Indian Council of Social Science Research and Manak Publications, New Delhi.
- Gupta, Dipankar (1996): 'Feminization of Theory and Gender Studies', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 (12), March 25, pp 617-20.
- Minault, Gail (1998): *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*, Oxford, Delhi.
- Mukherjee, Ramakrishna (1979): *Sociology of Indian Society*, Allied, Bombay.
- Mukhopadhyay, Carol C and Susan Seymour (eds) (1993): *Women, Education, and Family Structure in India*, Westview Press, Colorado.
- Singh, Yogendra (1986): *Indian Sociology: Social Conditioning and Emerging Concerns*, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi.
- Sundaram, D (2000): 'Sociology in Post-Independent India: A Self-Assessment', *Journal of the Madras University*, vol LXIV, April, pp 114-24.
- University Grants Commission (2001): *Report of the Curriculum Development Committee*, UGC, New Delhi.