

Continuing Neglect

The Census 2001 placed male literacy rates at 78.85 per cent while the corresponding figure for females stood at 54.16 per cent (1991 – 39.2 per cent). But this justifiable pride in growing numbers of literate Indians is overshadowed by the fact that a substantial section of the population still remains illiterate, with women and girls forming a greater portion of those deprived. Of the estimated 60 million children still out of school, 35 million are girls. States with low female literacy rates are Jharkhand, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Jammu and Kashmir.

The department of elementary education and literacy asserts that consistent efforts towards improving participation of girls in education have borne fruit. Schemes like the National Literacy Mission, Mahila Samakhya, Operation Blackboard, Lok Jumbish and DPEP under the umbrella of Non-Formal Education schemes have led to substantial improvement in raising female literacy rates. But disparities are noticeable across states and the programmes remain plagued by underutilisation and misutilisation of allocated funds. Even though gross enrolment ratio (GER) figures for women have gone up from 24.8 per cent in 1950-51 to 81.8 per cent in 1996, this remains low when compared to boys' enrolment.

The sixth report of the Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women on Educational Programmes for Women (2000-01), ascribed low female literacy rates to gender inequality, social discrimination and economic exploitation coupled with low enrolment of girls in school, low retention and high dropout rates. Enrolment figures at primary and middle school levels point to a massive gender gap, starkly evident in Bihar, UP, Jammu and Kashmir and even Chandigarh, a region otherwise more advanced in several other respects. In rural areas, girls engaged in household work such as fuel and fodder collection, fetching of water and sibling care, drop out of school. Other reasons for dropping out of school could be parents' indifference, poverty, absence of single-sex schools, unsafe travel and lack of facilities as women teachers, lack of toilets.

The committee recommended the introduction of awareness creation programmes – measures as situating primary schools within a distance of one-km walking distance of residences; increased allocation of funds under various schemes and other improvements such as – providing drinking water, fuel, fodder and creches. These latter measures, falling outside the purview of the education sector, would free girls and women from household chores. The committee has also made other recommendations which would benefit educationally disadvantaged groups such as the suggestion to promote the use of media and for shared centre-state initiatives in areas of pre-school education for the age-group 0-6 to ensure an early start for growth and development, appropriate teacher training; providing cooked meals to children instead of rice or wheat and the involvement of local community, etc. Surprisingly,

secondary and higher education also, the report points out, saw an increasing underutilisation of funds for all the years from 1995-96 to 1999-2000. Education experts have repeatedly pointed out, as for instance in the 'Education for All' forum in Dakar, Senegal, 2000, that initiatives on women's education need to be synchronised with other broader developmental objectives, as well as involving the wider community. Such initiatives have borne fruit in at least two states, Himachal Pradesh and Mizoram and female literacy rates have shown impressive improvements. In Himachal Pradesh, female literacy rates rose from 9.49 per cent in 1961 to 70 per cent in 1996-97. The state's per capita expenditure on education has always been high. In 1995, (base 1981-82: Rs 100) it stood at Rs 215, as compared to Rs 134 for the country as a whole. The state expenditure on education as proportion of SDP is 7.8 per cent. Operation Blackboard has been a big success in the state. Besides, roads have been built across hilly terrain, land reforms have seen more than 95 per cent of the state's population in possession of some amount of land; all the state's villages are electrified and even health conditions have improved as reflected in improved infant mortality rates and maternal mortality rates. Gender relations in the hill villages are seen as more equitable than in the plains. Also crucial has been the wider community involvement, spearheaded by NGO efforts in organising awareness generation programmes for mahila mandals and adolescent girls. Moreover, government schools remain of consistently good quality so that the state has been able to avoid stratification of the school system.

In the north-eastern state of Mizoram, the credit for literacy improvements lies with social organisations like the Young Mizo Association (YMA) and the Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP). YMA began a library movement in its 600 branches and also set up open schools. The Mizoram Women's Federation has also organised women's groups to run balwadis and creches. It also ran vocational centres and condensed courses for high school pass-outs. All this reflects in the state standing a proud second in terms of overall literacy, with female literacy rates at an impressive 85 per cent in 1991. **EW**