Culture, State and Girls: An Educational Perspective

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This paper attempts to examine the childhood and education of girls in India in the context of their socialisation in the family and the historical evolution of the State's capacity to deal with gender issues. The customs and rituals under which girls are brought up and gendered into womanhood constitute a regime which is incompatible with the normative view of childhood implicit in child-centred policies of education. The evolution of the Indian state under colonialism has made it structurally predisposed towards the maintenance of patriarchy. Education can hardly be expected to interfere with gender asymmetry unless it is epistemologically reconceptualised with the help of a collective academic enterprise involving several different disciplines.

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If, at the beginning of the 21st century, we notice little girls sitting in early primary classes in numbers comparable to those of little boys, we need to remain wide awake to the possibility that the educational experience of the two might radically differ on account of what they have already "learnt" at home about life and its differential meaning for the two sexes. Girls' education needs to be looked at in a far wider and more complex perspective than what is generally applied with reference to social policy goals specific to education, such as closing the "gender gap" or giving equal opportunity to the girl child. A wider perspective would demand from us the recognition that girls' lives and education in contemporary India continue to be shaped by cultural forces deeply anchored in history.

These cultural forces, and the institutionalised practices which embody them, have a long history which goes back to ancient India. This history shows remarkably little impact of the changes that have come about in Indian society since ancient times. In an essay on historiographic paradigms of the study of gender relations, Chakravati (1999) cites a similarity between the structural formation of institutions that governed gender relations in early India and those which govern gender relations in contemporary Indian society. The structural framework Chakravarti is referring to covers socio-legal devices of a customary character which regulate perceptions and decisions on matters as significant as the age appropriate for marriage, eligibility for economic independence, and social status. While discussing the policymaking role of the modern state in the cultural sphere, we tend to overlook or underestimate the force of customary devices which uphold the frames of common perception as well as the practices which perpetuate these frames. These devices wield an extraordinary power over the behaviour of both men and women in their various roles. The power is extraordinary because it has the capacity to adjust to changing circumstances and milieu.

This paper argues that the State's social policy agenda in education will remain inconsequential if cultural forces shaping the lives of girls are not taken into account. The paper is divided into three parts. The first one focuses on the idea of childhood, its construction under modernity, and the State's role as the chief upholder of the normative meaning of childhood in the context of education. This part also points towards the nature of the modern Indian state which evolved as a result of the experience that the State apparatus had of dealing with culture under colonial conditions. The second part of the paper discusses socialisation of girls in the family. The argument put forward in this section is that the concept of socialisation is inadequate for grasping the elaborate

process of cultural imprinting that girls go through, both during early childhood and during puberty.

The heuristic portrait of girls' experience provided in the second part forms the basis of a discussion of how girls might experience their life and education at school. The purpose is not merely to assess the adequacy and appropriateness of educational policy in terms of its intent and substance, but to revisit the State's encounter with culture. This is attempted in the third part where the interface between the State and girlhood – shaped by the age-old processes of cultural imprinting at home – is discussed. The paper concludes by suggesting that girlhood in contemporary India needs to be understood in a wide, interdisciplinary kind of epistemological context if substantial and effective policies and practices are to be designed for reforms in girls' education.

1 Childhood and the Modern State

One of the many social functions the modern state performs is to create a normative regime of childhood. As a constitutive framework, modernity obliges us to perceive childhood as a symbolic representation rather than merely as the early part of human life. As terms, both "child" and "childhood" are enveloped in the global history of modernisation. Seen from a historical perspective, "childhood" is hardly a term but rather a trope which signifies a certain quality or a set of qualities associated with the early phase of human life. We can identify these qualities in the discourse of "child-centred" education which, by itself, symbolises a struggle in the domain of ideas and pedagogic practices. They first arose in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries and, thereon, gradually travelled to other parts of the world, giving rise to new questions and debates. Child-centredness implies the need to take into account those qualities which are now universally associated with the discourse of progressive education and child rights.

These qualities can be viewed as forming a nucleus around *agency* – a term now widely used in the wake of the cognitive revolution in psychology (Bruner 2004), to signify the child's own drive to learn. The idea of agency accommodates individuality in the nature and style of learning, interests, and the integrity of the child's personality, signifying the unity of its physical, intellectual and emotional aspects. These are the attributes one necessarily associates with childhood in the contemporary world. It is self-evident that, viewed as a set, these attributes represent the universal culture of modernity. The assumption – which now underpins a law in India – that every child has a right to elementary education is an aspect of this culture. To what extent is the State able to uphold this universal culture of modernity depends on the character the State has acquired as a result of its historical growth in a specific cultural setting and on its capacities to create and sustain an apparatus in order to deliver the promise of modernity in the context of childhood. The awareness that both "child" and "childhood" are available to us as historically constructed and necessarily normative terms sharpens our insight into the sociocultural space girls occupy in contemporary India. The normative character of the concept of childhood enhances our appreciation of the issues and challenges it poses when applied in the context of girls and their education.

1.1 Who Is a Child?

Though seemingly rather obvious, the question "Who is a child?" reveals its epistemic demands the moment we stretch it in order to grasp the implications of being a child. As Davin (1999: 33) suggests, "the question 'What is a child?' must be followed by further questions – in whose eyes? When? Where? What are the implications?" By pointing out these subtexts hidden in the word child, Davin is asking us to be ontologically mindful and responsible as we proceed to distinguish childhood from the larger frame of life, specifically adulthood. Essentially, the question "Who is a child?" requires us to pay attention to the boundary which might conceptually separate adulthood from childhood, without there necessarily being much scope for such a separation in the historically constructed reality of millions of children.

A tempting option is to talk of childhoods rather than any single model of childhood, but if we succumb to this temptation, we compromise the normative force of childhood as a trope and inadvertently forfeit the possibility of certain essential conditions being demanded in the course of struggle on behalf of children irrespective of where they are born in the disparate and diverse landscape of society. In the case of gender, we need to maintain a comparative view in order to assess the extent to which girlhood and boyhood, as culturally carved out social categories, might approximate the normative idea of childhood.

1.2 Culture and the State

The manner in which the modern Indian state conceptualises and deals with culture carries the imprint of colonialism, both as an ideology and as the historical experience of colonial rule of the modern state. A vast socio-economic distance between lawmakers and the governed was axiomatic to colonial social policies, including educational policies. The conscious "othering" of the native was the core of colonialism as an ideology. The social agenda of the colonial state was shaped by utilitarian ideas in a context in which life and culture of the native were being epistemologically discovered, along with flora, fauna and the terrain, and stored as a body of knowledge (Kumar 1991).

The law and order state emerged in the context of a population perceived to be irrational and driven by passions. The idea that the State had a responsibility to educate the people of India consolidated in the colonial state's discourse in the first half of the 19th century, as an aspect of the political agenda of colonial rule. The agenda included the improvement of native culture and morality at a pace which might be compatible with the economic goals and necessities of the colonial state. Such compatibility was felt to be attainable and sustainable only by minimising explicit conflict with the custodians of culture. Drastic measures or interventions in native cultural practices had to be delayed: postponement serving as a means to convey, on one hand, the moral aspirations of the colonial state and, on the other, its patience. As Sarkar (2009) has pointed out, colonial administration took four decades to interdict sati in Bengal. This long period enabled the procedural state to enhance its capacity and legitimacy by holding deliberations with brahmin scholars and carrying out patient enquiries into culturally sanctioned murders of widows, many of whom were children, age-wise.

As an ideology, colonialism signified subjugation, followed by the maintenance of an everyday order in which native elites were asked to participate. Their response gave the State the opportunity and the means to identify the contours of its own functional capacities. Matters pertaining to girls and women fell in the sphere of culture, which the colonial state learnt quite early to enter with caution. The practice of sati was the first major context in which the colonial state officials acquired the experience of dealing with gender. The analysis of early 19th century debates over sati made by Sarkar (2001, 2009) demonstrates the role the State played in legitimising the role of brahmin priests and scholars as interpreters of ancient Hindu codes. By fixing the age of 16 as the minimum permissible age for allowing a "woman" to commit sati, the colonial state made its first historical attempt to assert its power to draw a boundary between childhood and adulthood. However, this boundary could not be maintained in the context of marriage and the age of cohabitation (euphemistically called "consent"). The Sarada Act, which sought to ban child marriage a century after the banning of sati, fixed the minimum age of marriage for girls at 14.

1.3 State-elite Interaction

Over those 100 years that divide the banning of sati and the banning of child marriage, the colonial state went through extensive learning which shaped its own character and style of operation in the sphere of gender relations. This prolonged learning, and the State's evolution resulting from it, was an interactional process. On one side, the colonial state was imbibing the art of balancing its own missionary righteousness, often expressed in racist terms, with the instinct for survival in a foreign land; the latter helping the colonial state to judge the limits of "interference" in native culture. On the other side, the native elites were refining the intellectual resources and skills necessary for ensuring that their hegemony would be perpetuated in a changing economic and political scenario.

The emergence of nationalistically inspired associations, in and around the presidency capitals from the middle decades of the 19th century onwards, facilitated the articulation of male voices on a variety of matters, including cultural issues, which precipitated differentiation and politicisation of opinion (Seal 1968). Following the failure of the 1857 rebellion, a new grammar of self-consolidation started to surface among upper caste elites. It took different regional forms, depending on the specific socioeconomic context of each region, but a culturally revivalist strain ran across regional grammars.

Nationalist and colonialist ideas came closer in setting collaborative agendas in many orbits of social life, acquiring a homonymic relationship (Kumar 1991). In nationalist usage, the moral potential of education was seen as being attainable by reviving the values of an ancient past, embodied in Vedic culture and practices. To the colonial state, the moral agenda of education meant the development of personal rationality and a practical common sense or awareness of material self-interest: a trope signifying the ideals of "the man of property", to use the title of a novel by Galsworthy (1906) which portrays upwardly mobile life in late Victorian England. The two agendas converged in a conservative outlook towards the State's moral responsibilities, the convergence being particularly sharp and convenient in the context of gender relations.

While the colonial state had internalised the wisdom of ambivalence on matters pertaining to girls and women, upper caste nationalists of different persuasions shared the urge to uphold India's dignity in the face of glaring evidence of cruelty and discrimination faced by the female population. The nationalist argument acquired a revivalist character by inventing a history of India's decline since Vedic times in its record on women (see Altekar in Roy 1999). With the intensification of the freedom movement in the early decades of the 20th century, women's organisations too could not resist the need to secure their nationalist credentials in the emotionally charged debates over child marriage and Catherine Mayo's *Mother India* (Rathbone 1934; Pedersen 2004).

1.4 Politics of Hindu Identity and Girls

Education of the native provided the training necessary for the participation of upper caste men in the State's discursive activities which expanded in latter half of the 19th century. Education provided to its male beneficiaries the knowledge and communication skills required to participate in the widening scope for employment in the State apparatus and upward mobility through it, and also enabled them to reconstruct and reinforce patriarchical beliefs by extending their power over the emerging sphere of popular politics. The institutional and political pressures of patriarchy, as articulated by nationalist upper caste elites, shaped the modern state's awareness of its own interests and capacity in the cultural sphere quite consistently over the last two centuries, first under colonial rule and later under democracy in free India.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the principle of male governance over female instrumentality had begun to get rearticulated in the political voice of early nationalism. Tilak's opposition to the age of consent bill and his emergence – when resistance failed and the bill got enacted – as a hard-line political leader of religio-cultural revivalism offer us a means to notice how patriarchy got woven into the fabric of nationalism under colonial rule. The suspicious attitude of Tilak towards the potential effects of modern education on girls was already known when the debate over the age of consent unfolded and reached its climax, following the death of Phulmani Bai, an 11-year old girl who had died after intercourse. Tilak's disagreement over the possibility that the husband could be held responsible for this found a sharp and uninhibited expression when he wrote, "Is not even the present law outrageously merciless if it can severely punish husbands for rarely expected defects of female organs?" (Wolpert 1962). This and numerous other comments on the age of consent bill made by revivalist nationalists of varying stature, in both western as well as eastern India, convey how deeply entrenched, in the mind of conservative Hindu elites, was the perception that a young woman was essentially a mechanical device of nature to enable men to manufacture their progeny under their own supervision and control.

In her analysis of the debate over age of consent in Bengal, Sarkar (2001) shows the extent to which Hindu nationalist logic

found resonance in the opinions and judgments given by English officers and judges. The eventual passage of the age of consent bill and, later on, the enactment of the Sarada Act, can indeed be viewed as major liberal victories, but such positive assessment should not blind us to the cost at which these victories were attained. The scale and nature of the opposition the colonial state had faced from cultural revivalists made it aware of the risks inherent in gender issues. In the history of the Indian state, the prolonged debate over the age of consent can be regarded as a critical experience of internalising its limited capacity to deal with gender. The State's awareness of its operative capacity in the sphere of gender grew in a scenario in which the urge for an articulated collective self-identity was emerging as a major factor of modern nationalist politics.

Gupta (2001) has examined the reconstruction of patriarchy in late 19th and early 20th centuries in northern India. Her work shows how the modernising impact of colonial rule on the economy and society was mediated by the rise of a revivalist Hindu identity which used women's sexuality as a means for acquiring an aggressive political character. Lengthy historical debates, sustained for more than 100 years, first over sati, and later, over the age of so-called consent and the age of marriage, brought the girl's body and its biological development centre stage amidst the sociocultural processes whereby a new collective male identity was getting trained to engage politically with the colonial state. It is in this engagement that Hindu nationalism was born, both ideologically and as a wider construction lodged inside the edifice of the modern state. Sarkar puts this sustained development into words which match directness with accuracy, "The Hindu woman's body is the site of a struggle that for the first time declares war on the very fundamentals of an alien power-knowledge system" (Sarkar 2001: 225). The only clarification this observation requires for present purpose is that the "woman's body" was really a girl's body, i e, a child's body.

1.5 After Independence

In the debates surrounding the Sarada Act and Catherine Mayo's *Mother India* (Sinha 1998) we can notice further consolidation of a culturally revivalist modern Hindu identity. The Sarada Act failed to make much impact on the cultural landscape in which patriarchy was reincarnating and re-equipping itself to face the challenge of modernity and political freedom. A sustainable compromise between the State and patriarchy was reached. It would allow the post-independence state to fulfil its colonial sense of duty towards the people of India, permitting the personal sphere of their life, wherein gender asymmetry would be practised and perpetuated, to be protected by the ideology of modernity and its respect for privacy. Historically, the State's ability to engage with women's issues had already become weak when the upper-caste elites, on whom the colonial state had depended to acquire a social location for itself and its legitimacy, sensed and resisted specific threats to established cultural norms.

Independence from colonial rule gradually permitted democratic politics to deepen and expand, allowing the emergence of accommodative discourses and institutional structures which enabled the State to sustain its ambivalence in the sphere of

culture. Religion was an important part of this sphere; it posed many visibly sharp questions for policymaking in matters such as the conduct of elections, the design of curriculum and textbooks, composition of the police force, and so on. There were equally sharp questions to be faced in the specific sphere of gender, and in every case they were perceived to be entangled in religious beliefs and practices (Guha 2007). Symbolic expressions of patriarchy, including its violence, in girls' upbringing and marriage-related customs and laws, belonged to an orbit which could be flexibly classified as either private or public, depending on the exigencies of the situation. Public debates over matters like age of consent, treatment of widows, and the content of girls' education, had already trained the State under colonial rule to recognise gender relations as a sensitive matter which called for reluctance and caution to be practised under all circumstances.

Recognising this ambivalent character of the modern state helps us to contemplate and assess the role that educational policy can be expected to play in redressing gender asymmetry. In the specific context of girlhood, we can further grasp the nature of the challenge that the State faces in education by turning our attention towards the world from which little girls come to school. That world continuously interacts with life at school, shaping pedagogic relations at a deep level. We can hardly contemplate the school's status and function as a social institution without constructing the milieu in which girls grow up before enrolling and while they are at school.

2 The World of Home

The boundary between childhood and adulthood is a socially conceived and upheld construct which has to do with the perception of an individual life and its worth. It is a simpler matter to appreciate the biologically visible difference or boundary between infancy and childhood than the distinction between childhood and adulthood. This is because the infant is totally incapable of fulfilling survival needs without help, and does not possess the capacity to comprehend or articulate linguistically conveyed messages of any substantial length. A five-year old child, on the other hand, whose infancy has passed, displays a certain degree of freedom and commands language-related skills needed to converse with other children and adults. The decision to treat the five-year old human as a child, rather than as a small adult, is a social decision, involving certain attributes of childhood which are socially conceived. This part of the paper discusses child-rearing in the context of girls. The practices that characterise girls' upbringing in India have received scholarly attention relatively recently. Older studies (e g, Whiting 1963) of childhood focused on the upbringing of boys and presented it as a description of child-rearing in a general sense which might cover both boys and girls. As far as early childhood is concerned, the belief that there is no sharp sex divide in this period is common, and that explains why even the recent scholarship which focuses on girls' upbringing, concentrates on puberty and the years following its arrival.

2.1 Growing Up Female

In the case of a boy belonging to the family of a farmer or a craftsman, one might say, childhood was traditionally deemed to end

when the child's contribution to family's work and livelihood started to get acknowledgement. To some extent, this continues to be true even though the gradual growth of enrolment in elementary classes has prolonged the period of childhood, in the sense that it has reduced the unacknowledged involvement of small boys in the family's work. The case of girls is quite different. Their involvement in the family's work starts in childhood and continues throughout the school-age years, but never receives acknowledgement. *That* is what it means to grow up female: to learn to work and live without being acknowledged. And this simple definition holds validity across quite varied socio-economic classes and settings.

Self-denial is a special quality if a man possesses it, but a defining characteristic of a woman. At what point in childhood does a girl begin to learn, and then truly learns or accepts, that self-denial is a marker of her gender identity? The question looks more pertinent for being asked than for being answered. This is so because its answer depends on what we regard as "learning". Following Bruner's survey (2004) of the history of the theories of learning, one can say that the concept of learning may itself be highly context-specific and not just the content of learning. To the extent that self-denial is a gender-differentiating characteristic, the beginning of its learning must be dated as early as the first expression of the gender-differentiating behaviour of adults looking after a child. Sufficient scholarly evidence exists to date the beginning of such adult behaviour at the time of the child's birth. The arrival of a son is greeted with happiness, whereas the birth of a daughter brings forth uninhibited expressions of melancholy or indifference (Kakar 1978). The inculcation of self-denial in the female baby takes two routes. The first route lies through the imposition of restriction, aiming at early training in self-restriction and self-regulation, in all aspects of personal and inter-personal life. The other route lies through role-modelling after the mother.

In a seminal paper on girls' upbringing Dube (2001) uses a wide array of cultural source-material, such as folk songs, lullabies, proverbs and culturally rooted metaphors to draw a general portrait of female socialisation in Hindu society warranted by available scholarship. The groundwork of her analysis comprises the contents of customs, rituals and practices associated with festivals and everyday life in different parts of India. The comprehensive account of girls' upbringing provided by Dube offers three major themes relevant to the present paper: *one*, centrality of marriage and motherhood in the life-world of girls in India; *two*, early imparting of the knowledge that the home where one is born and brought up is temporary, both as a physical space and in an emotional sense; and *three*, the dual and paradoxical character of the female human body as a symbol and as an instrument. Dube takes into account the processes of social change in modern times that might have affected the child-rearing regimes prevailing in urban India, but she emphasises that such processes are essentially unfolding within the boundaries that the cultural ideology of subordination of women lays down. The ideology of women's subordination requires the precise creation of certain dispositions of mind, and not merely behaviours. Salient among these dispositions are self-denial, lack of autonomy, and acceptance of a subordinate position.

These negative proclivities are established by a routinised rearing system which compels girls to curb their child-like agility and restrain their physical movements and gaze. Giving priority to others' wishes and cultivating readiness to accept guilt and to feel a sense of shame are among the qualities girls are required – and not merely encouraged – to imbibe since long before puberty brings in a still harsher regime. At that point, a crucial dimension of the acceptance of one's impurity on account of menstruation is added and reinforced by customs and rituals, causing a permanent sense of inferiority in the context of caste and kinship-related roles (Narayan et al 2001).

2.2 The Negative Self

Before elaborating on Dube's portrayal and theorising with its help, it may be worthwhile to refer once again to Kakar's (1978) description of the joy which permeates the home of a new-born male. The source of parental, especially mother's, sense of fulfillment apparently lies in the certainty of continuity which a male progeny brings to the family, and the approval of its status in the community. The birth of a female progeny meets the opposite kind of reception, both in terms of the mother's own disappointment over a lost opportunity for gaining status, and the displeasure felt by the family, in having to accept a "burden" as a girl is openly called in social parlance. The important point to note in this familiar scenario is the undocumented but logically imaginable impact on the female siblings of the newborn in the immediate family or the neighbourhood.

Arrival of a female newborn is one of the several critical moments listed by Dube (2001) in the sustained learning that girls receive, both at home and in the neighbourhood, about the meaning of being female. Another such moment comes when a girl in the neighbourhood or a sibling at home reaches puberty and dramatically loses her role in important festive and other rituals on account of having become "impure" due to the onset of menstruation. Yet another, major moment of learning for younger girls comes when an older girl gets married. The processes through which a girl passes in order to be selected as a bride by potential in-laws constitute a crucial lesson for other girls regarding the status of being an object of selection, and also about the attributes used as a basis for consideration for selection. Finally, when a girl goes through the elaborate rituals which mark the formal closure of her natal life and the beginning of a new phase of life in the in-laws' home, other girls learn what they too must go through.

In Dube's account we find rather few explicit acknowledgements of the psychological meaning or implications of this learning. As a social anthropologist, Dube avoids the use of adjectives and adverbs which might constitute a value judgment on what is essentially a cultural practice. However, Dube does characterise the dispositions that the everyday aspects of the treatment a girl receives from adults might create or reinforce. The relation that a girl learns to establish between her body and space, for example, and her imbibing of a self-denying, ambiguous and submissive stance leads to a certain lack of self-confidence and initiative, Dube says. Her theoretical conclusion is, in fact, far stronger than any adjectives she uses in the course of her analysis:

The structuring of women as gendered subjects through Hindu rituals and practices is fundamentally implicated in the constitution and reproduction of a social system characterised by gender asymmetry and the overall subordination of women (Dube 2001: 113).

Dube points out that the structure of gender relations in Hindu society sets the outer limits within which education might exercise its limited roles. The structure is symbolically captured by the metaphor of seed (male) and the field (female) which shapes kinship rights and status under patriarchy. The metaphor, used since Vedic times (Singh 1978) signifies quite clearly what the upbringing of girls teaches in detail: the lesson that because a woman is replaceable, dispensable, and dependant, she must develop early in life the propensities and the mental and physical habits required to live a life of submission to a given structure.

2.3 Boy Child, Girl Child

At this point, it is important to notice the distinction between boyhood and girlhood from the perspective of the normative idea of childhood discussed earlier in this paper. Studies of childhood in India show that autonomy is not favoured as a characteristic to be nurtured during upbringing, and this is true for both boys and girls (Kumar 1993; Saraswathi 1999; Walsh 1983). Dependence on the mother in the context of everyday needs like eating, getting dressed and so on is common in boyhood. Boys are perceived as being cute and naughty as they pester the mother for constant attention. However, this kind of cultivation of dependence among boys, which reinforces the attitude in them that they cannot be expected to look after themselves, is an altogether different kind of phenomenon from the lack of independence cultivated in girls. The latter kind of dependence is a life-perspective, not a disposition towards everyday needs. The dependent boy learns his centrality in the family while the mother serves him and actively teaches her daughter(s) to assist her. Sons learn that it is their customary right to be served while daughters learn that their role is to serve and facilitate the brother's comfort and progress.

How differently the male and female progeny are perceived can be placed in sharp historical relief by referring to the custom of female infanticide which has now reincarnated in the form of female foeticide. As a custom, the killing of female children existed widely in the 19th century. Panigrahi (1972) has analysed the genesis and impact of the law formulated in 1870 to curb the widespread killing of girls at an early age. This history resides not merely in the collective memory of regions, communities and families, but more importantly and ubiquitously, in the far commoner and living culture which sanctions the expression – by members of the family and community through remarks as well as through rituals – of displeasure at the birth of a female child. In addition to the history of girl-killing during early childhood, modern India also lives with an equally substantial and living memory of matrimony, sexual consummation and pregnancy during girlhood. Despite the attempt to raise the minimum age for marriage to 14, made through the enactment of the Sarada Act in 1929, marriage during childhood continues to be a reality for millions of girls.

A recent report based on National Family Health Surveys (Kishor and Gupta 2009) has established the median age at the time of marriage for girls to be 16.8 years, which is six years less than that for boys. This finding suggests a grimmer reality than the 2001 Census had revealed. According to the 2001 Census, the median age stood at 18.3 for girls and 22.6 for boys (Census of India 2008). As a pan-Indian social reality – not confined to the Hindi belt as is widely believed – marriage during childhood provides the overarching frame for the socialisation of girls. The term "overarching" is being used here in order to point towards the fundamental characteristics comprising girls' induction into the adult world.

A distinction between fundamental and variable characteristics is important and useful to assess the applicability of childhood as a normative category, discussed earlier in this paper, to the earlier phase of women's life when they were girls. Girls who are now sent to school and college, and thus escape early marriage, do nevertheless go through a prolonged conditioning for viewing motherhood as the ultimate fulfilment of a woman's life. It is not just parents and relatives who, through routine comments, enable daughters to internalise this received wisdom. Cinema, television, and the advertisement industry also forcefully participate in the process and transform it into a joint enterprise of culture and commerce. How childhood is experienced by girls is apparently so different, and its social construction so markedly at variance with the social construction of boyhood, even in wealthier classes, that a generalised application becomes meaningless.

2.4 Is It 'Socialisation'?

Although this paper has so far used the term socialisation it is important at this point to question the adequacy and appropriateness of this concept for describing what girls' upbringing constitutes. The concept of socialisation has its roots in the distinction made by Durkheim (1893) between mechanical and organic solidarities as two principles of social organisation. In his functionalist model, socialisation is conceptualised as a process which enables an organic society, characterised by intensified division of labour, to build a general consent on certain beliefs, values and norms which a society might need in order to survive and perpetuate itself. The concept of socialisation resolves or smoothens the tension between the differentiated individual and society. As a result of being socialised over a prolonged period in an impressionable period of life, a person imbibes a deep-set sense of advantage in abiding by the values of society and its norms of behaviour.

Apparently, thus, the concept is applicable to a context where individual freedom and dignity have already emerged as social values. Such a historical context is generally believed to be coterminous with the advent of modernity as experienced by western societies. The debates surrounding modernisation of Indian society have been greatly concerned with the religious rights and freedoms available to individuals and communities in a democratic and secular order. Religion is also central to Dube's aforementioned account of girls' upbringing in Hindu society. Although the term socialisation is used in her account, its details indicate an *enforcement* pattern specific to the gendering of girls. The procedures used are harsh and the goal is to ensure that the

resultant personality has no choice but to accept the lack of both autonomy and personal freedom. We necessarily stretch the concept of socialisation when we characterise such an all-encompassing regime, aiming at subjugation of the feminine self so that it accepts its dependence on a male master, as socialisation. It would be more appropriate to call it a process of cultural imprinting, to convey a sense of inevitability and depth in the impact made on the mind and behaviour of girls by the regime of ritual and restrictions placed upon them.

3 Education: Interface between State and Home

In the discourse of universal modernity, school education is regarded as a function of the State. In the context of education up to the elementary level, the amended Indian Constitution now goes explicitly along this universal discourse of modernity and recognises the challenge involved in educating every child in India for eight years between the ages of six and 14. The specificity of this challenge resides in the fact that although education is a state responsibility, the successful fulfilment of the responsibility depends on the active cooperation of society. Efficiency of the State, in this context, can hardly be measured without taking into account the social world – its current ethos as well as its institutions – in which the State attempts to fulfil its educational responsibility. To what extent the State acknowledges this externality, what it believes can be done to engage with it, and what it ends up doing are highly relevant issues on which the State's success depends.

The preceding section has drawn a picture of the experiences that girls go through before they enrol at school and while they are there. For education to fulfil its role in a "child-centred" perspective, it is important that this picture informs curricular and other educational policies. It is necessary to inquire whether the State's policy of child-centred education acknowledges the need to differentiate between boys and girls as children, given the difficulty of applying the common attributes of childhood in the case of girls, even during their pre-puberty years.

3.1 Child-centred Education and Girls

The main ingredients of child-centred education are structured around the attribution of agency to the child. As a principle of curricular planning and teacher training, child-centred education contains certain strategies which flow from the idea that the child is an active and born learner, whose own initiative can be used as a resource. Among the strategies which have been popularised over the last century of writing and research the most familiar ones are – organisation of activities which enhance the child's individual personality and the freedom to explore, creation of an ethos which encourages the child to relax and treat the adult as a scaffolding for growing into an ever-widening universe of cognitive and emotional challenges, and the use of language, in all spheres of its application, as a means to think, communicate, and relate. These few ideas represent a child-centred perspective in education and they are now routinely mentioned and included in state programmes aiming at reforms in curriculum, teacher training, and classroom pedagogy (NCERT 2006).

If we juxtapose this set of ideas with the summary given earlier of the customary practices involved in the upbringing of girls, we can recognise a fundamental contradiction between the two. Tradition and customs require girls to learn during childhood that they must submit to male authority in all dimensions of their life. The core of this learning lies in giving up any claim to autonomy and individual uniqueness. With the full force that religious beliefs and their colourful representations in mythology might be expected to carry for the young mind, a girl is made to recognise the all-encompassing value of her body as a means of satisfying the male urge for sexual pleasure and the in-laws' need for progeny. As discussed earlier, restrictions on physical movement and posture, and on the use of time and space, begin much before puberty, but after menarche these restrictions acquire comprehensive rigour.

If we add to these the anxieties that the inescapability of leaving one's parents' home after marriage can be expected to arouse, we can fully appreciate how incompatible with girlhood in India the basic principles of child-centred education, and indeed the very idea of the *child* underpinning these principles, might be. Imparting a deep sense of dependence is the crux of girls' training in the family. Their gendering into acceptable womanhood requires that they abandon any hope of being an exception to the primary lesson about dependence. Both in terms of its emotional content and the reasoning on which it is based, the agenda of cultural imprinting on girls' minds sharply contradicts the objectives of child-centred education. As Chanana (2001) has observed, social and educational goals converge in the case of girls, denying them any scope for exercising agency. The cultural agenda demands the curbing of girls' child-likeness at the youngest possible age to enable them to cope with the psychological effort required by their adult roles as wives and mothers, and by the norms governing these roles.

It can be argued that as a philosophy, child-centred education has not been easy to implement in the case of boys too. Indeed, in a society governed by the institution of caste, the challenge of noticing and enhancing the child's individual interests and capacities is applicable to boys as well as girls. The crucial difference is that in the case of boys, the success of child-centred pedagogy depends largely on the teacher; in the case of girls, the teacher's attempt, if it were to be made, is pitted against the full force of culture. In certain aspects, such as the use of the child's physical agility and initiative, the teacher's attempt to organise an active classroom for boys is backed by cultural beliefs and practices at home which offer to the male child better nutrition and freedom to develop physically. Discriminatory provision of food and medicine results in higher child mortality and malnutrition among girls (Sagar 2007).

Moreover, as emphasised earlier, self-denial is an important value cultivated in girls. It is nurtured by the family in a wide range of contexts, including that of basic needs like food and medical attention during sickness. Differential treatment of sons and daughters begins at birth itself, and adverse circumstances necessarily increase the differential. The basic point is that boyhood, howsoever constrained – at home by poverty and illiteracy of parents, and at school by the poor quality of

teaching – is a favoured state of childhood in a culture steeped in patriarchy. Moreover, there is no reason why we should not expect teachers, including female teachers, to be submerged in a patriarchical cultural perspective. Training programmes and course which might induce a sustained introspective stance and bring about a reorganisation of the teacher's self are quite rare (Batra 2009; Gupta 2008). Moreover, the beneficiaries of such courses require support systems to be able to sustain their professional autonomy, and such systems are rarer than the courses themselves.

3.2 Body-centric Discourses

Thus, we come face to face with the fact that culture is a crucial variable which shapes the operation and outcome of educational policy and provision. By sticking to the undifferentiating discourse of child-centred education, policy and planning overlook both the role of culture and the means utilised in the enactment of that role for the gendering of girls. As a social institution and process, education poses to the State a major challenge in the context of culture. Whatever the school does within its four walls inevitably interfaces with what goes on inside the four walls of the home. While the school is perceived in modern societies as an institution of the State, privacy of the home is assumed as a value under modernity, especially in the context of a liberal political vision. In societies where this vision has unfolded in conditions of epistemic autonomy, the State's power to trespass the boundaries of home has been defined by an explicit legal framework. In colonised societies, the issue has proved both highly sensitive and critical for shaping the disposition of the State towards cultural matters and its powers to deal with them. Several examples can be given, both from within the history of education and also from the larger sociocultural history which shapes education.

No example can be more relevant for our present purpose than that of early marriage as a custom which continues to defy the State by challenging and curbing the effectiveness of its legal authority. State policy has been guided by the assumption that the spread of education will gradually discourage and eventually eliminate the practice of marriage during a period of life which should constitute childhood. There has indeed been a slow decline in the incidence of child marriage over the last eight decades (i e, since 1929 when the law to curb it was first enacted), but there is no evidence of a parallel increase in the State's capacity to enforce the law against child marriage. This is evident from the 2006 revision of the law. The revised version offers remarkably little advancement over the original law in terms of operational clarity over the means to identify and punish the guilty responsible for a child marriage.

The currently operative version of the anti-child marriage law once again shows how cautious the State has been in expressing its urge to intervene in the cultural sphere of people's life. It has wanted to exercise its agency but did not possess much. Moreover, the imposition of a minimum age for marriage has been ignored mainly in the context of girls which is evident from the aforementioned sharp difference between boys and girls in median age at the time of marriage. This difference proves that

social beliefs and attitudes which govern girls' lives have persisted despite the various processes of social change and an overall gradual decline in the phenomenon of child marriage. These dispositional factors have to do with the perceived purpose of a woman's life and the centrality of her body in the social philosophy which sets that purpose.

A crisp evidence of the narrow outlook which shapes the cultural universe surrounding girlhood can be found in the text of a current advertisement against early marriage given by the central government during All India Radio's news bulletins. Designed as a conversation between two mothers one of whom is looking for a groom for her minor daughter, this advertisement explicitly articulates the message that before the age of 18 a girl's body is not mature enough for marriage and motherhood, and *that is why,* says the advertisement, parents should not marry her away before that age. This kind of instrumentalist view of a girl's body is not, of course, confined to the media or the law-enforcement machinery of the State. It is equally evident in the wider academic discourse which uses the statistically significant link between female literacy and decline in the growth rate of population, to argue that girls' education reduces their fertility.

Progressive though such a discourse is in terms of its aims, it perpetuates the asymmetry which characterises the perception of the value of education during childhood in the case of girls as opposed to that of boys. In the case of girls, a narrowly defined physical utility of female life forms the cornerstone of modern developmental and educational agendas in the context of population growth.

3.3 New Contradictions

Over the last two decades or so, this body-centric view has gained a new kind of currency under the processes associated with the political economy of globalisation (Mani 2009). The social sciences, including education, are struggling to develop an adequate discourse to discuss and analyse these processes. No nation state seems to have the will or the capacity to deal with the rapid growth of the tendency to use girls' bodies as visual commerce. Growth in child trafficking and child prostitution offer related cases of the inadequacy of legal provision and research. The older category of "child labour" is still applicable to all these forms of modern exploitation in which girls are the prime victims just as they were in traditional forms of sexual exploitation and oppression through institutions like child marriage. Estimates of girls serving as house maids in urban middle class colonies across India are just as rough as the number of girls pushed into prostitution at an early age. The State's agenda remains anchored in a general charter of social responsibility even as new and harsher forms of exploitation and oppression have gained space in modern ICT-based industries, the media, and the global tourism and fashion industries. The partnership between neoliberal economics and patriarchy has turned the girl's body into what Brumberg (1997) calls "an all-encompassing project".

The last two decades have witnessed a considerable rise in girls' enrolment in primary classes in all parts of the country. In

certain states nearly universal enrolment of children of the relevant age has been achieved in class I. Attendance and retention rates vary, but they have improved in every region. This progress can be attributed to the ongoing concerted effort under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan which is now struggling with the tougher challenges of improving attendance – as distinct from enrolment – and the quality of teaching at the primary level, and all of these in addition to universal access at the upper primary level (MHRD 2010). More girls are attending schools today than they were in the 1990s, and their proportion in the total population of school-going children has also increased in the aggregate national picture.

This picture of improved participation of girls in education, though, needs to be framed in the remarkable demographic change that has taken place in gender ratio. It varies across regions and within regions, but there is a perceptible and sharp increase in gender gap at birth which can be attributed, in addition to the persistence of gender-discriminatory child-rearing practices, to the growing popularity of the new pre-birth sex-detection technology and easier access to sex-selective abortion facilities. This phenomenon, which has evolved as a parallel process during the same period in which rapid increase has occurred in girls' access to primary education, has a modern face inasmuch as it is associated with symptoms of modernity, such as the spread of literacy and education among women and urbanisation (Patel 2007).

This counter-balancing phenomenon forces us to conclude that while the State's effort to bring a greater number of girls to the primary school has made considerable progress, the overall proportion of girls in the population of children has declined. This contradictory picture helps us view and assess the State's overall policy and performance in the context of girl's childhood rather than in the context of girls' education alone. Girls' enrolment is increasing in a socially regressive environment. More girls are getting educated, but in an ethos which emphatically conveys its negative view of girls. Those who are studying can hardly be expected to escape or overlook this broader message, particularly because they are getting educated, even as they might benefit from education in different ways.

3.4 Dual Challenge

In the socio-economic ethos of the early 21st century, the State's agenda in the context of girls and their education will gain realism and value if it takes into account the larger cultural context of girlhood. This larger context poses a twofold challenge. The first dimension of the challenge is to create conditions in which girls can experience childhood. As a normative category, childhood imposes a number of responsibilities on the State, some of which are of a material nature while others are dispositional. Material responsibilities include protection from hunger and malnutrition, and help in access to medical treatment, health education and safety. Dispositional responsibilities have to do with providing a benign educational environment, cultivating positive attitudes among parents, and protection of girls from abuse.

Given the prevailing state of school planning in India, both kinds of responsibilities demand a radical redefinition of the role of school authorities and of teachers. Preparing them to work with the community requires a shift in the prevailing policies which anticipate and encourage the community to provide active cooperation. While it is a benign principle of educational planning, it cannot be expected to offer positive results for girls' education in a society whose cultural fabric and history carry a deep and strong prejudice against girls. In such an ethos, school authorities and teachers need to learn about their role as adult educators who must expect to encounter parental resistance rather than cooperation when girls begin to show symptoms of autonomy and selfhood.

The second dimension of the challenge to be met in girls' education has to do with quality. Considerable research effort has gone into documenting the discriminatory treatment girls suffer at school. Apart from research on gender bias in pedagogic interaction, the prevalence of such bias has also been noted since long in curriculum and textbooks. Let us imagine that a school takes effective steps to counter these kinds of gender bias and creates a truly egalitarian ethos in gender relations. Will its success imply gender equality in terms of the quality of educational experience?

In order to answer this question, we need to recall the inquiry made earlier in this paper into girls' life at home. To recapitulate our earlier discussion, girls are taught to develop a self-censuring capacity at an early age, and they are lured into learning through customs and rituals, that the only worth of their lives as women would come from matrimony and motherhood. These aspects of the learning accomplished at home are incompatible with the goals of school education as articulated in the parlance of modern child-centred education. The educational effort made by the school, howsoever free of gender bias, cannot claim quality if it makes no attempt to counter the negative impact of girls' upbringing from early childhood onwards on their sense of self-worth as human beings (Kumar 2010).

As a social institution, the school faces a peculiar problem in that it must engage with the influence exercised by a social institution as powerful as the family. In a broad sense, the school is expected to play the role of an "equaliser" of opportunities by compensating for conditions which are predisposed towards inequality – towards its perpetuation as well as its sharpening. These conditions include not merely the material aspects of an

inegalitarian social order, such as access to food, rest and leisure, but also the mental or psychological conditions caused by the material aspects. For instance, inequal access to food, rest and leisure during childhood may bring a serious differential (between boys and girls) in capacities for intellectual labour, such as concentration and application of imagination. If the school's role is to counter such a differential it would be necessary to equip the school, and especially the teacher, to assess the negative impact made by the family during childhood on girls' personality and intellectual capacities, and to devise pedagogic means to encourage mindful and positive self-reflection. It would also need to provide an ethos which consciously attempts to train girls to cope with the socially alienating effects of such reflective capacities.

Conclusions

Recalling the historical development of the modern state under colonial conditions, and its compromise with the resurgent Hindu cultural identity as discussed in part i, we can ask the deeper question posed by Dube:

> Can we really think of reforming the education system to bring about a more "enlightened" relationship between the sexes as long as the larger structures which provide the context for the education system to continue to reproduce gender-based relationships of domination and subordination? (Dube 2001; 209).

This question goes to the heart of educational theory and compels us to delve as deeply as we can, in the analytical space it provides, for assessing the agency of education as a social process which operates in modern times under the aegis of the State. Given that education works against distant time-horizons and constitutes sustainable visions of life, knowledge and skills, its positive agency cannot be accessed without considerable and cohesive effort. The effort to assess and design its agency in the contemporary Indian context poses a cross-disciplinary challenge to the social sciences. On the one hand, it involves examining the historically weak and fragmented discourse of social policy in education and health, the fast consolidating neoliberal political economy which is likely to perpetuate the weakness of this discourse, and the academic ethos which permits the weakness to perpetuate itself. On the other hand, social sciences must examine the means and structures of the neoconservative ideology which enable both society and state to expose Indian girls to new forms of real and symbolic violence.

Neoliberal policies, especially the ones governing the cultural sphere, treat girlhood as a site for intensifying, within an earmarked sphere, women's participation in the consumer economy. The sphere within which this expansion is intended to take place forms the heartland of patriarchal control. In this heartland resides the woman whose body and sexuality are nurtured for dependence, and the nurturance begins when women are small girls. Studies of this terrain through the methodological and epistemological perspectives embedded in the different social sciences will have the potential to overcome the epistemological impasse that gender-related studies are facing in the stunted discourse of Indian secularism. The assumption underlying progressive policy and education in India has been that modernity is by itself a secular force. An assiduous effort to acknowledge the culturally confused character it acquired under colonial conditions is long overdue.

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