

# Education and Empowerment of Women: Some Critical Issues

Bhawana Jharta

This article focuses on the role of education in the empowerment of women. After a brief note on the conceptualization of women empowerment, some critical issues involved in empowering women socially, economically and politically as a consequence of their attaining education have been highlighted. Subsequently, an attempt has also been made to analyse the status of women's education in India and the hindrances faced by them on the path of education. Lastly, as a part of concluding remarks, some suggestions have been put forth to improve the educational status of women in order to empower them.

## *The Concept of Women Empowerment*

There have been many shifts in policy approaches in the last about fifty years from the concept of 'welfare' to 'development' and now to 'empowerment'. The term 'empowerment' has become very popular and fashionable now-a-days not only in social sciences but in the contemporary political vocabulary. With the onset of globalization, 'empowerment' is now being increasingly applied to the economically poor nations and the weaker and subaltern sections of the society. During the past two decades, the notion of 'empowerment', especially of women, poor and marginalized groups like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Minorities, etc., has significantly affected the paradigm of development. Empowerment is about radical social transformation. It is used for ensuring social transformation and economic development of the society. It is both a means to an end and an end in itself.

The term 'empowerment' is used for giving power to certain underprivileged and marginalized sections of the society like the poor, women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, etc. It can be interpreted as empowering the weaker sections of the society to take independent,

collective and voluntary action in order to enhance their living standard and social status. Empowerment can be defined as the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives, control relating to both resources and ideology (Mukerjee, 2003). Empowerment is also conceived as a process whereby people acquire more influence over the factors that shape their lives. It tends to be applied to disadvantaged groups of people, and is usually linked to vision of more equal living conditions in the society (Dale, 2000).

Empowerment is a process which strengthens the competence of people in general and the oppressed sections in particular. The strengthening of capacities is the main objective of the development process, and it can be achieved through empowerment of the alienated sections to enable them to help themselves and to manage their own affairs in society. The betterment of these sections can be expected only by their acquiring competence and creating adequate capacities to enable them to participate actively in the socio-economic and political affairs of the state. The underprivileged groups like women, dalits, tribals, peasants and labourers have been engaged in the struggle for power and these groups can be empowered by ensuring their participation in the development process (Malik, 2005).

Indeed, the meaning of empowerment is comprehensive but when we talk about 'empowerment of women' we are specific to the power given to women in different spheres of their lives like social, economic and political. Empowerment of women as a concept was introduced at the International Women's Conference at Nairobi in 1985. It was defined there as a redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women. An important means of women's empowerment is economic independence through information, knowledge and necessary skills. If a woman is economically a versatile parasite, she can never claim an equal status with men. Women's awareness about development is basic to achieving this economic empowerment. Empowerment of women, which is based on equality between the sexes, is a long drawn, conscious and continuous process—comprising enhancement of skills, capacity building, gaining self-confidence and meaningful participation in the decision-making process (Srivastva, 2005).

It is in the interest of the entire community to empower women. Jawaharlal Nehru once rightly said, 'To awaken the people, it is the woman, who must be awakened, once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves.' In its simplest form, empowerment of women means reorganization of power in favour of women. It is the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges

patriarchal ideology and the male dominance. It is a transformation of the structures or institutions that reinforces and perpetuates gender discrimination. Women empowerment means empowering women socially, economically and politically so that they can break away from male domination and claim equality with them (Avasthi and Srivastva, 2001).

Empowerment of women is construed as providing them with a sufficient degree of control, to give them the decision-making power, and enable them to raise the level of consciousness of their class and enhance their gender status and rightful entitlements. This can be done by securing greater success to, and command over resources, access to knowledge as well as ideological shifts that bring about changes in how women perceive themselves and how they are perceived in relation to the community. These, in turn, can be felt in terms of disposal of family incomes, community priorities and decision-making, overcoming the fear of employers, police officials, male authority, etc., and other manifestations like sharing of household chores by both men and women, perceptions regarding daughters, age of marriage, and greater assertiveness in terms of dealing with violence at home or in asserting right of access to public places like temples, village wells, meetings, etc. (Narasimhan, 1999).

To gain access to societal resources such as education, employment, political power and household resources like income, property, health, nutrition and decision-making are considered important pathways for 'empowerment of women'. Within the scope of these issues, education at all levels has been observed to be an important instrument for the upliftment and empowerment of women.

### *Education and Empowerment of Women*

Education is regarded as a process of empowerment through the imparting of knowledge, skills and values to individuals. Commensurate with the worldwide emerging demand for empowering women, education of women has become very important and pertinent. Indeed, women's education is an antecedent to women's empowerment, which is the recent buzzword around the globe. The movements for improving women's status all over the world have always emphasized education as the most significant instrument for changing women's subjugated position in the society. The different social exploitation of and humiliation of women over several hundreds of years has devastated the women race with powerlessness, voicelessness and ill treatments. The only remedy to overcome this malpractice is to make them literate by

providing them education at any cost through both formal and informal ways, so as to achieve a balanced socio-economic development of the society. No society can progress and develop unless and until the women are brought to the forefront of the society through proper education, training and social as well as economic rehabilitation. Ignoring women's education leads to gender inequality, which in turn severely affects the socio-economic and political growth process of a nation and ushers in social stratification causing serious damage and destruction to women and jeopardizing their empowerment (Sarkar, 2005).

Women's education in itself is an important indicator of their empowerment. It is a milestone for women's empowerment because it enables them to respond to challenges, to confront their traditional roles and to change their lives. Education has an impact on all aspects of women's life. The improvements in women's education helps in raising their socio-economic and political status in the society.

#### *Education and Social Empowerment of Women*

Women's education is the most powerful instrument for their social empowerment. Greater literacy and educational achievements of women can increase their strength to resist oppression, to protest against gender-based inequality, and to get a fairer deal in society. It is the only way to make their lives happier and healthier and to ameliorate the miseries in their lives. Education makes them aware of their rights and privileges in society, and is regarded as one of the means that enables women to assert their rights and achieve emancipation. It also contributes towards raising their consciousness and self-confidence. Education helps women to foster a value system which is conducive in raising their status in the society.

There is no denying the fact that education reduces inequalities between the sexes and uplifts the subjugated position of women in society. It helps in releasing them from the clutches of tradition and broadens their horizon of information and awareness about the outside world. It enables them to think rationally so that their actions are not governed by any stereotypical norms. Education breaks the chains of role-stereotype as it helps in changing social norms, values and standards, thus enabling women to come out of their secluded position and participate in the activities of the wider world. Education contributes in large measures not only to the elimination of the idea that women are inferior but also to the elimination of the inferiority of their actual status. It enables women to develop fully their individual, intellectual and moral qualities.

The educational achievements of women can have ripple effects within the family and across generations. It is rightly said that 'if you educate a man, you educate an individual but if you educate a woman, you educate the whole family'. If left in ignorance, women will hamper the progress that needs to be made in hygiene, dietary habits, nutrition, child care, health, general well-being, environmental protection and so on. Women's education also has a positive effect on the education of children, especially of girl children. The more educated the mother, the easier it will be for her children to get higher education.

Educated women have more control over demographic conditions. The findings of various demographic studies reveal that higher levels of women's education are strongly associated with their higher age at marriage, lower fertility, lower infant and mother mortality rates, more use of family planning methods, and higher women's life expectancy. Educated women are more likely to marry late, to postpone the first pregnancy, to keep more gap between births and to have fewer children in total (UNICEF, 1994). On the other hand, illiterate women often tend to have more children than they wish, thereby exerting mounting pressures on themselves, their families and above all the society. Further, women's education enables a better use of family planning methods and that results in a fall in birth rate. While this relationship is not always constant, the results of the study carried out by the Demographic Health Survey (DHS) in 1990 in 28 countries in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Arab States noted that the tendency for smaller families increased with the educational level of women. Family Planning methods are more widely used in countries like Botswana, Kenya and Zimbabwe, where about 70 per cent women have some level of education. This may be due to the fact that educated women generally have more awareness of family planning methods and are more likely to discuss and decide with their partners regarding the number of children they should have and when. They have higher potentialities to save and protect their children with special emphasis on the girl children who are the usual victims of social evils like gender bias, ill treatments, sheer manipulation, etc., beyond their limits of tolerance (Sarkar, 2005).

Education also plays a crucial role in child care and survival especially in relation to infant mortality rate (IMR). Mothers who have not received any education are more likely to lose children under five years of age than mothers with some education. Researches have shown that in India, the IMR of babies whose mothers have received primary education is half that of the children whose mothers are illiterate. As women's level of education rises, the number of malnourished children

declines. Further, pre-natal care and medical treatment at child birth increases with the mothers' level of education (Demographic Health Survey, 1990).

The general fertility rate (GFR) and total fertility rate (TFR) of women in India has been declining over the years. The GFR which was 140.9 in 1981 has declined to 103.2 in 1999. Similarly, the TFR which was 4.5 children in 1981, has come down to 3.2 in 1999 and to 2.9 in 2005. The sex ratio has also increased from 927 in 1991 to 933 in 2001. The infant mortality rate has come down from 80 in 1991 to 66 in 2001 and to 58 in 2005. The female infant mortality rate has also decreased from 80 in 1991 to 68 in 2001. The maternal mortality rate has come down from 437 in 1992-93 to 301 in 2001-03. The female mean age at effective marriage as per 1999 estimate is 19.6 years. The life expectancy at birth (2001-2006) in case of female is 66.91 years which is higher than that of the males of 63.87 years. These demographic statistics are indicative of the fact that with the spread of education among women, their health conditions and status has also improved to a great extent in India (*Family Welfare Programme, Year Book, 2002-03* and *Economic Survey, 2006-07*).

Besides this, education also helps women fight against various types of prejudices, social evils and oppressive practices in the society. Educated women try to propagates against social evils like female-foeticide and infanticide, child-marriage, prohibition of widow-remarriage, dowry and purdah system, etc., which hinder the progress of the society in general and women in particular. Education also makes women courageous, to enable them to fight against the atrocities committed against them and try to avail of their civil and legal rights.

As part of an individual's personal development, education is a right to which women should have access. Acquiring it enables women to increase their self-confidence, improve their self-esteem, become aware of their civil rights, improve their income-earning capabilities and play an active role in both family and community decision-making process. Education also plays an important role in self-empowerment of women, a process in which women gain control over their own lives by knowing and claiming their rights at all levels of the society, i.e., at the 'international', 'national' and 'household' levels. Self-empowerment means that women gain autonomy, are able to set their own agendas, and are fully involved in socio-economic and political decision-making processes (Agrawal and Aggarwal, 1996).

*Education and Economic Empowerment of Women*

Women will never become equal with men and they will not be able to get their rights and opportunities unless they are economically emancipated. For the economic empowerment of women, education plays a vital role. Today, a woman is an embodiment of the harmonious combination of teacher, wife, mother, home-maker, co-bread winner and administrator. No wonder the saying goes that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. Whenever, the education of women was neglected, they lost their economic independence and consequently their status. There can be no upliftment of women without the spread of women's education. Education is highly conclusive towards achieving economic independence and self-sufficiency of women. It is the key to ensure women's equal participation in every sphere of the development process. It creates choices and opportunities, leading to their empowerment. It is perhaps the single most important means for women to improve their endowments, build capabilities, overcome socio-cultural barriers, and to live a decent life while raising their earnings through an improved base of knowledge, skills and abilities. Women's education, especially in its professional and skilled form, is considered crucial not only for its emancipatory value but for the development of the society as a whole.

Women's participation in the labour force in the formal sector is directly linked to their educational levels. The increase in educational level leads to increase in women's participation in the labour force. The female work participation rate in India has increased from 22.3 per cent in 1991 to 25.6 per cent in 2001. This may be due to the increase in their literacy rate which has also increased from 39.29 per cent in 1991 to 54.16 per cent in 2001. Many studies have shown a close relationship between the level of education and productivity increase in the modern sector of the economy. Education increases the productivity of a woman, as educated women are more likely to work in wage employment and earn higher wages. A Woman's increased access to income opportunities is beneficial to herself, to the children, family and community at large. Education also increases women's productivity through self-employment in the informal sector. The trend towards an increase in the number of self-employed women, or of those who work on a contract basis, opens up several possibilities, particularly for those women who are their families' only means of economic support. Even in the agricultural sector, the increased productivity is linked to the educational level of rural women.

In the contemporary society of today, the social roles of women and men are changing. The gradual increase in the number of female heads of households, due to the rising number of men leaving home in

search of better job opportunities, gives women the responsibility of supporting the family, including taking over agricultural production in rural areas, or by entering the informal or formal labour force. Education is seen as a tool that will help women to carry out such tasks better (Agrawal and Aggarwal, 1996).

A working woman develops independence, assertiveness and self-assurance which are generally rare among a non-working woman. She holds herself in higher esteem than an equally gifted non-working woman. It also affects the power structure in the family. When the wife works, she presumably increases her ability to sanction or control because of the financial contribution she makes to the family. Hence, the male prerogative of decision-making in the family is gradually giving way to increased participation of women (Rao, 2000).

### *Education and Political Empowerment of Women*

Although most of the modern democratic constitutions of the world, including India have established the equality of men and women in matters of political rights, yet in actual practice women's participation in active politics is not very encouraging. The general experience in most of the countries of the world is that not many of them come to the forefront. They largely remain inactive and indifferent towards politics due to various socio-cultural, economic and political constraints. To be 'uneducated' and to be a 'woman' in itself is an important cause of less political participation of women and when these are united their effect is doubled.

Education is most significantly related to the political empowerment of women. It has a direct and positive relationship with political participation of women. Illiteracy hinders them from taking part in active politics. Uneducated and less educated women are generally passive citizens. Their political activities are mainly confined to voting only. Many active women participants in the political arena are better educated than their men counterparts.

Pierce, et al. (1990) point out that education is associated with higher levels of political activity and feelings of political efficacy. Nie and Verba (1975) are also of the view that more educated individuals are more likely to be interested in politics, more likely to have a sense of political efficacy, and more likely to have the necessary monetary and other resources that allow them to be active politically.

McGlen (1980) is of the view that gender differences in political participation depend on the level of education. The most likely explanation for the least educated citizens is a cultural one (sex-role

differences), while for more educated citizens, the cultural constraints explanation does not seem to be operative. Polsby, et al. (1963) point out that as a woman raises her educational level, she diminishes the political differentials between the sexes. Thus, the enhancement of women's education is accepted as the most promising agent of change in women's access to political power.

As such, education is considered a very significant factor in bringing about a favourable change in the political status of women. Educated women are said to be more aware about women's rights and duties in the political mainstream of the nation. Education helps women to understand the complexities of democratic politics and guides them to make the proper use of their voting and other political rights. As educated women have greater capacity to use the mass media, therefore they are likely to be more aware of politics and have right knowledge of political matters which help them evaluate electoral choices and use the suffrage rightly.

Education greatly broadens the political vision and perception of women. It provides them with secular orientations in their voting considerations. Educated women are more likely to give importance to the achievement-oriented factors such as party affiliation and individual merits of the candidate while casting their votes whereas they tend to give less importance to ascriptive-oriented factors like region, caste, religion and sex of the candidate.

Education is positively related to active political participation of women. Better educated women take more part in different modes of political participation like campaigning activities, contesting elections and unconventional political activities such as strikes, protests, political demonstrations, etc., and more of them also have political party membership and affiliation. Further, educated women possess higher political knowledge and awareness and discuss politics more frequently than the uneducated ones. Highly educated women feel politically more efficacious as compared to the less educated or the uneducated ones. They do not find 'being a woman' a serious handicap in solving their problems or in taking an active part in politics. They feel that they can affect the decision-making process at all levels. Education makes women conscious about their political rights; raises their self-confidence in dealing with political problems and offering solutions; makes them familiar with the formal structure of political systems, widens the horizons of their political information and awareness to facilitate their understanding of political developments; and it also enables them to discuss broad questions pertaining to social and political aspects (Jharta, 1996).

With the spread of education among women, a change has taken place in their attitudes and perception of their role. They feel that their role in society is not confined to only bearing and rearing children or to family responsibilities. Now, they no longer accept politics as the exclusive sphere of men. They feel that women should participate in politics equally with men. However, there are women who still consider the home as their primary sphere and give politics secondary importance. Most women do not want to adopt politics as a career. At the same time, they do not seem to be satisfied with the present representation of women in panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) and municipalities and especially in the state legislative assemblies and parliament, and want more representation of women in various decision-making bodies (Ibid).

Women constitute about half of the Indian population and over the years their participation by way of voting has increased and is not too low in comparison to men. However, their participation and representation in law-making and law-implementing bodies is not very satisfactory. This is evident from the fact that women's representation in the parliament and state legislative assemblies has not gone beyond 8 and 10 per cent, respectively. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have provided 33 per cent reservation for women in PRIs and municipalities. It is hoped that in the future, with the spread of education among women and enhancement in their educational status, their participation in politics and representation in decision making bodies will increase.

Thus, in order to reduce the gap between male and female political participation, the education level of women needs to be enhanced. The lower the level of women's education, the greater will be the difference between male and female participation in politics. In order to increase women's participation in politics and to empower them politically, they should be imparted proper education, especially political education in order to make them conscious about their political rights. This will enable them to raise their self-confidence in taking part in politics and make them realize that in dealing with various political problems, they are in no way less competent than men.

#### *Status of Women Education in India*

During the past two decades approximately, India has witnessed a positive transformation in women's empowerment. Although India still has to go a long way in attaining gender equality and gender justice, yet no one can deny this fact that its efforts towards redressing gender

inequality are more pronounced than in many other countries of the world. As education has a significant bearing on every sphere of human activity, the extent of success in promoting education and reducing gender differences should be taken as an indicator of women empowerment. In fact, Indian society has a history of denying opportunities for women to seek knowledge. This systematic denial of women's access to education has kept women in a state of perpetual ignorance and prevented them from seeking or utilizing opportunities for empowerment. For women in India, the past has been a gloomy period of ignorance and illiteracy, the present is an era of facing challenges and seeking equal opportunities, and in the future it is hoped that they will enter into the highest echelons of higher education (Janaki, 2006).

In pre-British India, women were not given education except for a few exceptions because education was linked to socio-religious institutions, reinforcing the patriarchal social order. During the British period, education became a tool of colonial power which permitted only a small section of society to have access to education. The Britishers did not consider it necessary to educate the women, perhaps because women clerks or officers were not required for administrative purposes. The nineteenth century social reformers raised their voice for women's emancipation. They saw the education of women as an instrument to improve their efficiency to perform their traditional roles. With the dawn of the twentieth century, some progress was observed in the field of women's education. Although the formal education of women made a beginning during the British period, the pace of educational development of women picked up momentum only after independence. Concerted efforts were made only after independence to advance the education of girls and women.

Since independence, our leaders, planners and policy makers have realized the importance of women's education as a tool for bringing about social equality and transformation. Education of women has been given top priority in order to remove women's illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to and retention in the educational institutions, especially in the institutions of elementary education. The Government of India has appointed various Committees and Commissions besides the education policies and programmes to facilitate and promote education among women. Provisions are made in the Constitution of India (Article 45, and 86th Constitutional Amendment Act) for free and compulsory universal elementary education for all children (both boys and girls) until they complete the age of fourteen years. In our various Five Year Plans also, top priority has been given to women's

education by the government so as to enhance their educational status.

The *Radhakrishnan Commission Report* (1950) and *Kothari Commission Report* (1966) have emphasized that opportunities should be given to women to obtain education, and the education of women is of even greater importance than that of men. The *National Policy on Education* (NPE), 1986, viewed education as a premier instrument for promoting equality of status and opportunity between men and women. It regarded education as an agent of basic change in the status of women. It stated that the national education system would play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women. It would foster the development of new values, through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision-makers and administrators and the active involvement of educational institutions. It also stated that women's studies would be promoted as a part of various courses and educational institutions would be encouraged to take up active programmes to further women's development.

The Programme of Action of National Policy on Education, 1992 entitled its first chapter as 'Education for Women's Equality'. It is a vital component of the overall strategy of securing equity and social justice in education. According to it, education can be an effective tool for women's empowerment. Further, on the recommendations of *National Perspective Plan for Women* (1988-2000 AD), a National Policy for the empowerment of women has been announced on March 20, 2001. The goal of this policy is to bring about advancement, development and empowerment of women through a process of change in societal attitudes towards women, elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and active participation of women in all spheres of life, which will empower women both socially and economically.

The Government of India has also started various schemes and programmes to promote and accelerate women's education in India both at the central and state levels. To encourage elementary education among girls, several incentive schemes have been adopted by the government. These are: Mahila Samakhya, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Mid-Day Meal Scheme, District Primary Education Programme, National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary level, etc. Besides these, the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD), under the aegis of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, has also introduced various other schemes for extending and enlarging the scope of education among the women and girl children, such as condensed courses for Education and Vocational Training, Distance Education Programme for Women etc. In addition,

under a centrally sponsored scheme, efforts have been made to arrest the school dropout rates and to improve enrolment and retention rates as far as possible with special emphasis on the girl students belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, Minorities and other socially disadvantaged groups, who are the usual victims, through providing hostel facilities and other incentives like scholarships, educational aids and other related support (Sarkar, 2005).

Apart from these schemes and programmes, education is made free for all girls upto the higher secondary stage in most of the states and union territories and many states have even made girl's education free upto the University level. Conscious efforts are being made to improve the content and make the process of education free from gender bias and sex stereotyping, and make the curriculum at all levels of education gender sensitive and gender friendly. Further, efforts are also being made by the government to encourage the participation of girls in vocational and technical programmes. A new scheme 'Technology for Women' has been introduced in the universities during 1998-99 for providing financial assistance for the introduction of undergraduate courses in Engineering and Technology. The Women's Studies programme in the universities and colleges is a major plan activity of the University Grants Commission (UGC) since 1987. Following the policy imperatives delineated in the National Policy of Education, 1986, the Women's Studies Centres were started in the Universities and over the years many universities and colleges have constituted Women's Studies Centres/Cells which have helped gear the higher education system to plan a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women (Srivastava, 2005).

The comprehensive education policies and various incentive schemes and programmes undertaken by the Government of India have indeed given a fillip to women's education. In the post-independence era, women literacy rate in India has shown a substantial increase. As per 2001 census, women literacy has gone up from just 8.86 per cent in 1951 to 54.16 in 2001. During the decade 1991-2001, the country witnessed a relatively faster growth in female literacy (14.87 per cent) than male literacy (11.72 per cent). The gender gap in literacy has also been reduced from 24.84 per cent in 1991 to 21.69 per cent in 2001. The enrolment of girls at all stages of education has improved appreciably over the years in the country. The girl's enrolment vis-a-vis total enrolment at elementary level (I-VIII) has increased from 17.7 per cent in 1950-51 to 73.6 per cent in 2001-02 (*Economic Survey*, 2003-04). Women's enrolment to the total enrolment in higher education has registered almost a fourfold increase during the period

1950-51 (10.03 per cent) to 2002-03 (40.05 per cent) (*UGC Annual Report*, 2002-03). A substantial increase in the enrolment of girls in educational institutions at all levels indicates improvement in girl's education which is very significant for their empowerment.

However, even after sixty years of independence, about half of the women population is illiterate in India and a large gender gap in literacy still persists. The gap between male and female literacy has increased from 18.30 per cent in 1951 to 21.70 per cent in 2001, which, in an ideal situation, should have been reduced. There is also a wide variation from one state to another regarding the access of women's education in India. States like Kerala (87.7 per cent), Mizoram (86.7 per cent) and Union Territories like Lakshadweep (80.5 per cent) have a better female literacy rate in comparison to states like Bihar (33.1 per cent), Jharkhand (38.9 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (42.2 Per cent) and Rajasthan (43.9 per cent) which have low female literacy rate. There is also a wide rural-urban differentiation in female literacy. The female literacy in urban areas is 72.99 per cent whereas it is only 46.58 per cent in rural areas and thus in rural-urban female literacy, there is a gap of 26.41 per cent. The gap between male and female literacy in rural areas is 24.60 per cent whereas in urban areas, it is only 13.43 per cent. Thus, special attention is needed to reduce this gender gap in literacy in rural and urban areas (*Census of India*, 2001).

Despite the increase in enrolment, we find that the female enrolment in educational institutions is low as compared to males and the drop-out rate of girls is much higher than that of the boys at different levels of education which is a major problem in India. According to an estimate, only about 32 per cent of girls entering the primary stage reach the end of schooling. High drop-out rates among girls is embedded in the various socio-cultural and economic factors.

In higher education too, women lag far behind men. A large difference between male and female enrolment is found. In 2002-03, women's enrolment per hundred men in higher education was 67. A faculty-wise distribution of girls' enrollment in higher education in 2002-03 reveals that about 88 per cent of the total enrolment of girls was in arts, science and commerce faculties while the remaining 12 per cent was in the professional courses like engineering/technology, medicine, education, agriculture, veterinary-science, law, etc. (*UGC Annual Report*, 2002-03)

Thus, despite the incorporation of a number of progressive policies, programmes and the concerted efforts of the Centre and state governments to improve the educational status of women, the achievement in this regard is not very satisfactory. Women education

in India is constrained by various socio-cultural, economic and political factors and the socio-economic conditions of the people, their attitudes, norms, values and value-orientations. Indeed, the entire gamut of socio-economic system influences the education of women. The prevailing cultural norms of gender behaviour and the perceived domestic and reproductive roles of women tend to adversely affect the education of girls.

The cultural prejudices, government apathy, lack of political and community will, poverty, illiteracy, the negative family and societal attitudes towards the education of girls, cost of education, early marriage, poor health and nutrition are some of the factors which deprive women of their right to education. The other factors which hinder women's access to education include the need for girls to work in order to help in augmenting the family income; the requirement for older girls to stay at home to take up domestic responsibilities and take care of siblings when mothers are away at work; lack of adequate facilities like school buildings, separate schools for girls, women teachers and women's hostels; non-availability of educational institutions in the area; considerable distance of educational institutions from the home; lack of adequate transport facilities; irrelevance of the content and curriculum of education and so on.

Many parents also believe that it is not worthwhile to invest in girls' education. Instead, they prefer to invest time and money to educate their sons, who will provide support to them in their old age. The parents of middle and lower classes think it wise to save money for their daughter's dowry rather than for their education. Most of them consider it an unnecessary expense as the girl has to go to some other family. Furthermore the education system has become so expensive that poor parents cannot afford it. In a family, the boy gets the first chance to get educated as he may become an earning member of the family. In this way, women have to face many problems and obstacles in order to get education.

### *Concluding Remarks*

India is poised to become a super power and a developed country of the world by 2020. This can become a reality only when the women of this nation become an empowered lot. It is imperative, therefore, to design strategic policies and programmes for promoting women's education which is a prerequisite for women's equality and empowerment and for their well being. Women's education is necessary in order to improve their status in society, to increase awareness of

their rights and their self-confidence, to enhance their aspirations, to question gender stereotypes and relations of inequality that limit their individual development, and lastly, to support everything that can help improve the quality of their lives, including participation in and equal access to the process of socio-economic development.

In view of the various socio-cultural and economic handicaps that have operated against the education of women, there is an urgent need to adopt a set of objectives specific to women's education. Some of the objectives to be achieved with regard to women's education are: elimination of illiteracy, universalization of elementary and secondary education, minimization of the drop-out rate in the case of girl students, reduction in gender gap, state-wise and urban-rural wise variations in female literacy, substantial vocationalization and diversification of secondary education to enhance economic opportunities for women, improvement in the quality of education in terms of the values it promotes and inculcates, the provision of access to professional and job-oriented courses for women, and providing non-formal and part-time courses to women to enable them to acquire knowledge and skills for their socio-cultural and economic empowerment. All graduate courses should include components for education for self-reliance, assertiveness, personal and social development, productive capacity and political understanding. Mere quantitative expansion of education among girls, without concern for the quality and type of courses offered will not lead to the achievement of the goal of empowerment or raise the status of women.

Adult, non-formal and formal education programmes for women would be helpful in reducing the gender gap in literacy. The Governments, NGOs, Self Help Groups, etc., should work on various gender issues so as to enhance the status of women and empower them, and these organizations need to be associated with an effective effort to initiate an attitudinal change in the parents of girl children in order to let their girls continue with their studies upto the higher levels. Girls should also be encouraged to continue upto higher levels of education and join vocational/technical and professional courses, so as to ensure employment opportunities for themselves. Women should be given vocational training so that they do not remain in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs.

Besides these steps, efforts should also be made to remove the inherent prejudices working against the education of women. The prejudices and biases against the education of girl children and women are so deep-rooted and complex that it is difficult for any government to overcome them unless the people work hand in hand. We need to

sensitise the people about the benefits of women education and try to change the prevailing social stereo-types, which are adverse to the development of women. The goals of universalizing women's education can be achieved by a combination of policy alternatives and interventions at the family, community, society, state and national levels.

The issue of women's empowerment is to be looked at a holistic perspective. The programmes for women's equality and empowerment, through acceleration of educational advancement, should be carried out with greater vigour and sincerity and should be matched by strong administrative and financial support. As this problem is largely confined to economically, socially and educationally backward communities and regions of the country, development of necessary infrastructure for learning, and undertaking economic measures to alleviate the incidence of poverty, would be conducive to promotion of literacy and education among women. Without a strong policy intervention to simultaneously attack poverty and illiteracy there cannot be much improvement in the socio-economic status of women. The nation must, therefore, develop an integrated package of a literacy and socio-economic development programme for women (Rao, 2000).

Gender sensitization is required at all levels. There is a need to promote societal awareness for gender issues, especially among planners, policy-makers, public representatives and the people at large. Women themselves should also fight for their own rights. They should not confine themselves to the four walls of their houses but should come out of their home bound commitments and traditional role assignments. Further, there has to be an attitudinal change in the mind set of the people towards women. Thus, in nutshell, it may be said that in order to ensure women's equality and empowerment, there has to be an integrated approach and women need to be involved actively in the process of socio-economic development. No action of the government and other agencies would be successful to empower women unless and until changes are brought about in the socio-cultural, economic and political milieu. Concerted efforts on our part are required to be made to evolve effective women oriented educational policies and programmes for their overall development and empowerment.

#### REFERENCES

- Agrawal, S.P. and Aggarwal, J.C. (1996), *Second Historical Survey of Women's Education in India, 1988-1994*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Avasthi, Abha and Srivastava, A.K. (ed.) (2001), *Modernity, Feminism*

- and Women Empowerment*, Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
- Dale, Reider (2000), *Organizations and Development: Strategies, Structures and Process*, London: Sage Publications.
- Demographic Health Survey (DHS) (1990), in Agrawal, S.P. and Aggarwal, J.C. (1996), *Second Historical Survey of Women's Education in India, 1988-1994*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Family Welfare Programme, Year Book* (2002-03), Shimla: Directorate of Health and Family Welfare, Himachal Pradesh.
- Government of India (1950), *University Education Commission, 1948-49, Report Part-I (Radhakrishnan Commission)*, New Delhi: GOI.
- Government of India (1966), *Report of the Education Commission (1964-66): Education and National Development (Kothari Commission Report)*, New Delhi: GOI.
- Government of India (1986), *National Policy on Education 1986*, New Delhi: GOI.
- Government of India (1992), *The New Education Policy 1992 (Programme of Action)*, New Delhi: Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development.
- Government of India (2001), *National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001*, New Delhi: GOI.
- Government of India, *Census of India (2001), Primary Census Abstract, Series-I, India, Total Population, Table A-5*, New Delhi : Registrar General and Census Commissioner, GOI.
- Government of India, *Economic Survey (2003-04 and 2006-07)*, New Delhi: Ministry of Finance, Economic Division, GOI.
- Janaki, D. (2006), "Empowerment of Women through Education: 150 years of University Education in India", *University News*, Vol. 44, No. 48, Nov. 27- Dec., 03.
- Jharta, Bhawana (1996), *Women and Politics in India*, New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications.
- Malik, S.S. (2005), "Women Empowerment and Panchayati Raj", in Chahar, S.S., *Governance at Grassroots Level in India* (ed.), New Delhi : Knishka Publishers.
- McGlen, Nancy E. (1980), "The Impact of Parenthood on Political Participation", *The Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 33, No. 3.
- Mukerjee, Asha and Bhattacharya, Kurakum, (eds.) (2003), *Conditioning and Empowerment of Women*, New Delhi: Cyan Publishing House.
- Narasimhan, Sakuntala (1999), *Empowering Women*, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

- Nie, Norman H. and Verba, Sidney (1975), "Political Participation" in Greenstein, Fred I. and Polsby, Nelson W. (ed.), *Handbook of Political Science: Non-governmental Politics*, Vol. IV, Massachusetts: Addison Wesley Publishing Co.
- Pierce, John C., et al. (1990), "Support for Citizen Participation: A Comparison of American and Japanese Citizens, Activists and Elites", *The Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 43, No. 1.
- Polsby, Nelson W., Dentler, Robert A. and Smith, Paul A. (1963), *Politics and Social Life*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rao, R.K. (2000), *Women and Education*, Delhi: Kalpaz Publications.
- Sarkar, C.R. (2005), "Women Literacy and India", *University News*, Vol. 43, No. 29, July 18-24.
- Srivastava, Nalini (2005), "Empowerment of Women Through Higher Education", *University News*, vol. 43, No. 47, November 21-27.
- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (1994), *The State of the World's Children*, 1994, New York.