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Girls' Education in Rural India: It's Finally Happening

India has a population of approximately 1,147,995,900 people, and about 25 percent of those people live at or below the poverty line. The per capita GDP is US Dollars 2,700. Furthermore, only 61 percent of the total population is literate, with numbers heavily skewed in favor of men (72 percent). Although the numbers of literate women are increasing, illiteracy is a factor that is a symptom and cause of women's subordination and lack of status compared to men. Illiteracy, combined with other sociopolitical factors, is one part of the dynamic that leads to an imbalance in the male/female sex ratio (1.06), and the lack of women in the labor force. Since 60 percent of India's labor force is agricultural and rural, it is important to study how education affects girls and women in rural India in regards to developmental policy (USA India). This paper will discuss why education is important in development, the history of women's education in India, problems rural educators face, modern-day developmental programs and how they affect women's practical and strategic interests, and what still needs to be done.

Why Education? The Spirit of Learning

Developmental projects aimed at reducing poverty may contain many components, ranging from economic security, water and sanitation, to basic health services. However, one that is increasingly gaining in importance, as evidenced by the Millennium Development Goals, is basic, primary education. According to the Swedish International Development Agency,

> The relationship between poverty and a lack of education is an obvious one. Those who receive no education have limited chances of affecting their lives. Education enables change and improvement and makes it easier for people to build personal opinions and take part in their society's economic, political, and cultural activities. A basic education, especially for women and girls, is one of the keys to economic growth and political and social development. The support of education is therefore one of the cornerstones of international development cooperation. (Why Website)

If societal equity is the goal of international development programs, then education is a key component of any project. It allows the served population to critically analyze their situations and take steps themselves to improve it. Education provides the first step in conscientization of subordination, and then may also facilitate the mobilization out of it.

Education is both a means to an end and an end in itself. Studies have shown

advancement in education is usually accompanied by improvement in self -esteem, change in character, and an improvement in overall social status. It also contributes to development "directly, because of its relevance to the well-being and freedom of people, indirectly through influencing social change, and indirectly through influencing economic production" (Melin 5). According the basic needs approach, education is a critical factor in the in the satisfaction and fulfillment of basic needs, such as nutrition, safe drinking water, health, and shelter (Melin 11). Therefore, education, women's social position in society, and health are closely inter-related (Kamat 3), and developmental programs that recognize this position and seek to work upon it will be more effective than ones that do not.

The Government's Educational Agenda

After independence from British rule in 1947, the state of India focused on the expansion of an educational system to create a skilled labor force and to meet the growing social demand for higher education (Patel 78). Even though the Constitution stipulated that elementary education be provided to all children from ages 6 to 14 by 1960 (Kamat 7), it was not until the democratic Janata regime came into power in 1977, did the state start an educational policy based on mass education—elementary education and adult education. With the new focus on mass education, the state's goal became to eradicate illiteracy, universalize elementary education, and make education more employment-oriented and ready to fit society's labor force needs. Since massive illiteracy was seen as a major hindrance to the participation of the rural poor in the populist development projects in the new government, the government embarked on a program to introduce and help people understand the rhetoric of the Janata regime of "conscientization, liberation, and dialogue" (Patel 79). In order to create awareness among the poor about their conditions of deprivation and various government laws and policies, as well as functionalize the workforce, they started an adult component focused on literacy, functionality, and social awareness. Interestingly enough, these are the same components used to bolster the importance of girls' and women's education in India today.

In 1986, The National Policy of Education was passed, advocating "universal access enrollment", "universal retention of children up to 14 years of age", and "a substantial improvement in the quality of education to enable all children to achieve essential levels of learning (Chapter 3). The act was developed to reflect the dominant development mentality of the time that although articulated concerns for quality and equity, actually focused on training selected peoples to become laborers in the modern economy and improve educational quality for the elite. Although this basic education was perceived to be an important contribution to "productivity, small families, lower infant mortality, improved health and hygiene and empowerment of women" (Patel 81), government funding did not back up all these initiatives. Almost two decades later, after failing to see a significant rise in primary education, the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act 2002 made education a Fundamental Right for children in the age group of 6-14

years by providing that "*the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may, by law, determine"*. Since India undertook the mission of universalization of elementary education, there has been an 80 percent decrease in the number of out of school children, and the gross dropout rate declined from 39.03% in 2002 to 28.49% in 2005 (Chapter 4).

Even though the Indian government advocates universal education, huge gender disparities have existed and continue to exist in the educational system. In 1947, the female literacy rate in India was 6.0 percent. This *high* of a number was due to the decentralization of education to provincial governments, the national movement for independence, adequate numbers of women teachers for primary and secondary schools, and social forces, such as the rise in the age of marriage of girls in urban areas and the demand for educated wives. The gender gap at the primary stage of education in 2005 was 4.2 percent; however, the dropout rate for girls is still more than 24 percent (Chapter 3). Only 46.7 percent of girls are in primary education (as of 2005; whereas, the goal of the Indian government is to ensure primary education for 100 percent of the eligible population (Chapter 5). Social and economic barriers, such as extreme poverty in rural areas and the value of education for women, have contributed to a have contributed to the low educational enrollment rates present today.

Problems Rural Educators Face

Educators in India face a set of challenges unique to their localities. In this section, the specific barriers to promoting education for women in rural areas across the state will be discussed. Values based on education, the financial opportunity costs for educating women, the economic value of women themselves, and tradition have shaped rural educational pursuits. Moreover, the utilitarian cost-benefit analysis prevents many large-scale educational measures to take place in India.

Access in education is based on income, caste, occupation, and educational level of parents. Children from rural families that are landless, agricultural wage-earning families and migratory groups have limited access to good education (Ramachandran 35). The Brahminical tradition, based on the caste system, also reserved the study of Indian books of knowledge specifically to Brahmin men. Therefore, if one is neither of the Brahmin caste nor a man, education is not within the traditions of the community, and girls' education is actually seen as a threat to social order (Rao 169). The tradition was also under the firm belief that a dichotomy exists between the natural qualities, capacities, and mental make-up of the males and females, and, therefore, their respective functions in society. The only objective of female education, if necessary, was to educate them to be better at home making and child-rearing (Kamat 12). Furthermore, the majority of students in villages are first-generation students that belong to government-recognized castes and tribes (Rama Problem). Since many of the students are the first in their

families to begin formal schooling, parental illiteracy and weak family support structures for education hinder their success and motivation to pursue education as a goal.

In India, most marriages are based on the dowry system, in which the girl's parents pay the boy's parents a sum of money to take care of their daughter and cement the marriage. Since they already have to give dowries, many parents see no need to spend money on their daughters' education. Furthermore, rural parents regard education as a hindrance to marriage for their daughters, because an educated girl requires a more educated boy (Rao 168). Nirmal Jhunjhunwala, a Mumbai resident with a school in Surajgarh, Rajasthan, also added, "In India, there is a government rule that you cannot get married before the age of 18. However, most rural girls get married around the age of 16 and do not even matriculate from secondary school" (Personal Contact 08 Jun 2008). Second, tradition also has led parents to believe that the role of the woman is in the household. Since the main duties of a daughter, then, are to help with domestic work and help raise her siblings, education, again, is not a priority (Rao 169). With fixed schooling hours, girls cannot do both domestic chores and attend school (Khan Website). According to J.P. Mundhra, founder of Sesomu School in rural Rajasthan, "Parents place many restrictions on females. The smaller the place, the greater the restrictions. After ages 12 or 13, girls are confined to the home. Parents do not want to let girls out to even go to boarding school. They also don't want their girls seeing boys in the village" (Personal Contact 08 Jun 2008). To be a good marriage-eligible girls, rural girls need to learn basic household tasks and receive basic apprenticeship, not traditional schooling—so their parents usually choose the former when given no other choice.

In addition to caste and gender constraints, parents are also hesitant to send their girls to school, because of unsafe conditions. Reports about abduction, rape, and molestation scare parents and cause them to keep their girls at home. This is especially true of girls that have reached puberty that must take transportation outside of their villages or live in hostels. In addition to a fear of sexual harassment that may occur during transportation, parents also worry about their girls studying under the supervision of teachers that are men. A lack of qualified women teachers discourages parents from allowing their girls to go to school, because they do not trust men as caretakers of girls (Khan Website).

Population growth, infrastructure development, and economic poverty pose huge problems to increasing education in rural areas. In an interview with J.P. Mundhra, he explained that there is a huge population problem in rural areas. "The average family has five to seven children, and the government is not increasing infrastructure on par with population growth." He also added, "In smaller places, it is not up to the child to pursue higher studies. The intention of higher studies is directly related to the size of the location. Bigger towns have more awareness and emphasis on education. In rural areas,

there are a limited number of students, and it is difficult for the government to justify expenses" (Personal Contact 08 Jun 2008). This lack of infrastructure growth had led to a chronic shortage of resources and teachers for children in rural areas. Especially in rural areas, students require transportation to attend middle and secondary schools, which are usually far from their homes. Since secondary education facilities assume children will drop out as they get older, they do not build up their transportation facilities, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Khan Website). Thus, even if girls do want to pursue secondary schooling, it is extremely difficult for them to do so due to the lack of transportation and close alternatives in their villages. Although many boys hostel facilities exist in secondary institutions, there is an apparent deficiency of similar housing for girls (Khan Website). In addition to transportation and hostel shortages, government-run primary schools also face a shortage of teachers. These teachers, who are forced to teach fifty-student classes, usually become apathetic and discouraged, and, thus, ineffective. In rural areas, teachers are also commonly absent from school, decreasing the chances of their students receiving good educations (Rama Problem).

Economic poverty also contributes to a lack of concern for education. Nirmal Jhunjhunwala emphasized about people in rural areas, "There is also an aura of economical backwardness. For families that do not have clothing or shelter, education is not a priority. In rural areas, most families are farmers who depend on the rains. If their crops fail, then they become poor. Then their existence becomes a question of survival, not of education." He also added, in relation to the Indian government, "In villages with less than five thousand people, one cannot expect more than primary schooling—it's just not cost effective" (Personal Contact 08 Jun 2008). In locations where basic security and livelihood needs are not met, it is difficult for the residents to look above Maslow's first level of needs to the ones after it.

In rural areas, there is already a shortage of capital. About three-fourths of work force is involved in agriculture, but that sector only makes up 17.6 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (USA India). Furthermore, the unemployment rate is 7.2 percent, and the unemployed are largely concentrated in rural areas. As primary caretakers of the home, men are given first-priority in available jobs. If men cannot find sufficient job income in their localities, they go to urban centers. Jhunjhunwala elaborated on the economic and social difficulties of educating women:

> The majority of the rural population is composed of farmers, who don't think of education. They are really poor, and, often times, boys don't even get education. The only reason the boys are educated are so they can be sent to the city to work. It is it a trend in rural areas that girls should not be allowed to go for work except for farming. Even if families own shops in larger towns, women are not allowed to [work] in them. It is still a men-dominated society. Women's liberation is

applicable to cities only. (Personal Contact 08 Jun 2008).

The economic and social value of boys' education is greater than that of girls'. In addition to the social barriers, J.P. Mundhra says, "Most women are not educated to a level where they can be helpful and absorbed into the labor force" (Personal Contact 08 Jun 2008); so, even if, the labor force had space, women do not acquire enough skills to be a part of it. Therefore, women are not considered first-priority candidates for education, nor are their educational objectives valued across the board.

Changes in Attitude

Although the rural areas in India face educational challenges, the government and other organizations are taking steps to work within the traditional structure and create awareness about the importance of education itself. Nirmal Jhunjhunwala says that when he made his school co-ed three years ago, he had to get a council together to go around the village and convince parents that their girls would be safe and that education was important. He said, "Gradually, awareness is increasing, and parents are allowing their girls to go for education. Times are changing, and girls are getting educated." Jhunjhunwala also touted the practical benefits of girls' education. "If housewives can understand things better [through education], they can communicate better. They will also improve their children's upbringing. " He related the education of a mother to the health and psychological benefits she could provide her children. He further added, "Girls' education can also be used in case of emergency. They can give [tutoring] at home. They can also make some extra money by doing stitching and cleaning" (Personal Contact 08 Jun 2008). Instead of furthering women's interests in a Western feminist manner, organizations are finding a way to fulfill the practical needs of good housewives through educational opportunities.

Programs Being Implemented (Governmental and NGO)

Since the importance of education in rural India has only increased in the last decade, the most common methods for increasing girls' education are still residential bridge courses that help them catch up to their current grade levels, girls-only schools, and more transportation/access to existing schools. However, some programs, implemented by both the government and non-governmental organizations, have taken a pro-active approach in dramatically increasing the amount of educated women. Three programs that appear to be the most effective and innovative in increasing girl literacy will be discussed in this section: The National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level, Balwadi Schools, and The Rishi Valley Education Project.

The National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL)

In 2001, the Indian government passed the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)

legislation to provide universal elementary education to all children across the country. However, the original bill did not specifically address the needs of girls nor did it have adequate funding or resources for them. As an additive component to SSA, the National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) was passed recently. The purpose of the additional legislation is to target girls in "educationally backward," or rural, areas (Guidelines 1),"to develop and promote facilities to provide access and to facilitate retention of girls and to ensure greater participation of women and girls in the field of education," and "to improve the quality of education through various interventions and to stress upon the relevance and quality of girls' education for their empowerment (Guidelines 2).

In order to fulfill its mission, the Government of India is opening Model Cluster Schools and providing grants to existing institutions. Model Cluster Schools are groups of schools for five to ten villages that each has specific facilities, such as gyms and computer labs, to be shared among the various schools. Although the plan is unclear, it appears that the Government of India is trying to maximize utility of infrastructure development by concentrating its resources in certain areas and then transporting girls to locations to fulfill specific needs.

In addition to the creation of Model Cluster Schools, the Government of India is mobilizing communities and then providing them grants to help their children go to school. The revised SSA program calls for the formation of resource groups, such as Mother-Teacher Associations and Women Management groups that will assist the government in bringing girls to schools and monitoring their achievement, attendance, and retention (Guidelines 9). Additionally, since most schools in India require students to purchase their own textbooks and wear uniforms, a Mother's/Women's Committee will be the designated allocator of funds that pay for girls' textbooks, stationary, uniforms, and other schooling materials (Guidelines 7). The subsidization of material costs allows parents, especially those facing economic difficulties, to send their girls to school, without spending great portions of their incomes. Community mobilization techniques and grants fulfill two empowerment missions. First, they allow girls, who may not otherwise have been able to, get primary education. Second, they give mothers and other women the power to organize and allocate resources, increasing their decision-making capabilities in their communities.

Balwadi Schools

In response to the high drop-out rates of students in rural villages, The Vanasthali Rural Development Centre started a nursery school program that teaches children from ages three to six in their own villages. Nirmalatai Purandare, the founder of the Centre, has worked since 1981 to open *balwadis* (nursery schools) in every village in Maharashtra. Since 2003, over 210 *balwadis* have opened in nine districts across the state (Dhavse Website). According to Purandare,

> The child in the city is groomed into the process of education. Play groups that are conducted for children in the age bracket of 3 to 6 years mould the child to function as a member of a group and ready him for the process of learning. However, this preparation for socialisation, so to say, is almost always absent in villages. Because primary education is compulsory, the child is picked up at the age of 6 and put into a school. But he has neither been groomed to accept schooling nor is he ready. Consequently, the dropout rate is high in the subsequent years. What we need is a grooming ground for the rural child, similar to what his urban counterpart has. (Dhavse Website)

The *balwadi* program was specifically created to meet the needs of young children getting ready to enter primary education. The *balwadi* model is very similar to the Montessori School method. They emphasize practical training and holistic child development. With this method, crafts, songs, and dancing are incorporated into an average preschool curriculum of numbers, the alphabet, and colors. By starting this program, the Vanasthali Rural Development Centre prepares children for primary school and offers the basic training needed for every child to succeed.

In order to teach nursery-age students, the Centre trains local residents to become *balwadi* teachers. Since the group believes that "educating a woman is often the path to educating her entire family too" (Dhavse Website), they train women to act as the *balwadi* teachers. To expose the women to life outside their villages, the organization manages training camps that allow them to meet their counterparts and network to form a stronger teacher community. Through the process of becoming teachers, local women gain self-esteem and confidence in their abilities as managers. In addition to self-empowerment, the women also gain social status as *balwadi "tai"* (elder sisters). Although the main purpose of the organization is to prepare children from ages three to six for primary education, their secondary goal of "character-building" and "employment" help empower the women they employ, and further women's interests and statuses in villages.

The Rishi Valley Education Project

The Rishi Valley Education Project (RVEP) is a non-governmental organization that hosts a village school in the interior of southern India, has expanded its resources in the form of over seventeen satellite schools, and has developed a curriculum based on independent motivation. Since rural areas often face teacher shortages and one teacher often manages more than two hundred students of different educational levels at one time, the Rishi Valley Education Project has developed a hands-on curriculum that allows students to learn at their own pace through flash cards (Rama Strategy). RVEP has created a collection of 1500 "study" and "work" cards that reduce the need for textbooks and direct teacher-student guidance (Rishi Website). The study cards allow students to

learn at their own pace and share their cards with other students, raising the literacy rates of entire networks of people. Students work in study groups, support each other, and do individual test taking, forming a collaborative rather than competitive learning environment.

To further the value of education in rural areas, RVEP helps facilitate the creation and sustainability of satellite schools through community involvement in the educational process (Rama Strategy). The village of each satellite school provides the land and does the landscaping for the school building to build a stronger sense of pride, ownership, and value in schooling. RVEP also trains local youth to use their flash cards in schools located in or near their villages. Although it is unclear from the resources provided, there is a high likelihood that the trained youth in villages are older girls and young women (as inferred from other resources). If this is true, then this project accomplishes a similar result to *balwadi* schools: women gain status in their communities as educators.

The Rishi Valley Education Project promotes gender equity in three ways: through its management organizational structure, by educating older youth in villages, and creating a curriculum based on individual learning. In analysis of a project, it is important to ascertain whether the management structure is dominated by a certain gender or if the organization is gender-balanced. In the case of RVEP, only two of the six board members are women (Rishi Website); however, a couple, Rama and Padmanabah Rao are the main proponents and administrators of the project. Within their work, Rama (the man) organizes mothers, and Padmanabha (the woman) focuses on developing the training methodology. Both husband and wife do activities outside of the gender norms, since usually women organize women and men do the intellectual development work. Second, by training older youth in villages, RVEP is increasing the value of these individuals in the community. By becoming "teachers," the trained youth (mostly likely young women) gain respect in the eyes of elders and younger students. Finally, a curriculum based on individual learning allows students, especially girls, to learn basic literacy skills without worrying about rigid time constraints. Therefore, if need be, they can fulfill their household tasks and gain a basic primary education. RVEP is a project that does not focus specifically on furthering women's or gender interests. The manner in which it empowers women is by fulfilling basic rural community needs (such as curriculum creation) and employing community members (which happen to be older girls and mothers) to support them in their endeavors.

Where Research is Lacking

Research on rural education in India is minimal. Although the subject appears to be on a broad topic, covering a country that is of rising prominence in the international scale, few global institutions have studies about rural education in India. Most relevant studies found date back to the 1970s when the Janata regime was promoting its populist

agenda. The Government of India has the best educational research, but the website is not updated and does not have easy access to documents. Furthermore, Indian institutions and SIDA, one of the few international ones, are of the handful of organization that do research on education in India and publish it internationally. In United States and gender databases, most research about rural India was relegated to economic prosperity. It is possible that with the "tech boom," new studies on India are geared towards the economic realm. Also, by looking at the USAID website, it is inferred that most projects in rural India focus on safe water access and HIV/AIDS prevention. This leads one to believe that although education is important, it is not a top developmental priority for international agencies. Furthermore, infrastructure costs in rural areas are higher than in urban areas, probably accounting for the concentration of developmental programs in urban slums—due to communication and cost-effectiveness. The cost of studies in rural areas also causes a challenge, since the areas are difficult to reach and have small sample sizes.

What Needs to be Done

The benefits of education are shown in countless studies. They allow girls to take better care of themselves and their children, empower them to pursue other avenues of life except motherhood, provide an economic safety net, and teach them to develop critical thinking skills necessary in problem-solving and decision-making. Since the majority of India is still based in rural areas, the Government and NGOs need to effectively meet the needs of citizens outside of the cities. Most developmental and educational programs are aimed at the urban poor, taking for granted the majority of India's population. Furthermore, in researching rural education in India, it appears that a few basic methods are used to advance girls 'education: grants from the government, girls' residential schools, *balwadi* schools, and more women teachers. However, significant infrastructure development and adequate facilities for students are still lacking in most of India. Furthermore, the needs of the rural poor have only recently been made a priority on the Government agenda, leading to a continued lack of support and research on effective methods. Although the costs of education are high in rural areas, the government needs to increase infrastructure development, ensure girl student safety, and provide economic incentives for families to send their children to school. Since many families depend on their older girls to take care of younger children, subsidized health care and/or flexible school hours can also help ensure that girls are, in fact, receiving a proper education. Education is one of the major steps that can help empower women and their families, and give them tools to live happier, healthier lives.