



The role of non-formal education in advancing the literacy education for women in Bihar (1947-2000)

Ruchi Priya

Research Scholar, T.M.B.U., Bhagalpur, Bihar, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66856/ijhssr.2026.12.2.12196>

Abstract

The education of women was made possible not only through formal education, but various attempts of governmental/non-governmental organisations via Non-formal education (NFE). The emphasis on literacy was also substantiated by Non-formal skill-oriented teaching imparted through various policies, but in Bihar they were partially successful due to conservative and backward society.

Keywords: Non-formal education, female education, Bihar

Introduction

Education imparted to women in India was not a serious concern of society and it was considered negligible in nineteenth century India [3]. It was due to the socially constructed responsibilities of women whom they were expected to be good at. Men were considered as bread-winners, head of the family and fit to manage most of the outside work whereas women were assigned the task to look after children, elders and all household stuffs [4]. Their house-hold unpaid work was considered menial and underpaid if performed outside [5]. Apart from this, women were rarely in decision-making and managerial positions which automatically suppressed their authority in many of the cases i.e. education for women. There were superstitions of becoming widow or developing rebellious tendencies to disobey custom if women started getting educated [6], and their education generally limited up to the auspicious religious books with some amount of account management skills to some of the propertied families [7]. But a mass number of women were unconscious and even unbothered with their own education and career.

The literacy rate of Bihar was affected by the result of long neglected education by colonials, later the national movements like 'Swadeshi' made them avoid anything colonial; formal education, feudal practices generally worked for their self-interest; collecting rents and less concerned about the social or economical advancement through the spread of literacy. Non-changed attitude towards the development of the state and resource allocation favoured the already advanced regions [8]. Reservations and schemes for the welfare of women and underprivileged sections were surely given in governmental posts but caste politics in Bihar along with social and economical issues made the task of spreading education even more challenging by creating the situation of chaos and restlessness in society [9].

The deteriorated literacy level was due to the unexpected increase in illiterates in 1961 than in 1951 as per the Kothari Commissions 1964 report with the increase of 36 million illiterates. The untraditional methods were emphasized to impart knowledge through adult education [10] to improve the deteriorating rate of literacy with respect to the increasing population. Later, non-traditional methods i.e.,

adult education were started as a complementary side to support formal education by the Kothari commission and further dealt in the NPE 1968. Non-formal education officially recognised as a separate department in 1988 by the NCERT under which different schemes were launched in Bihar. Mahila Samakhya Yojna and Sarva Siksha Abhiyan were some of the states initiatives to spread literacy among girls. Before coming to Non-formal educational schemes and policies and its reflection on Bihar, it is important to discuss how the Non-formal education would deal with the backwardness of society while improving the status of women and their literacy understandings.

Usefulness of Non-Formal Education in Advancing the Literacy Education for Women

In a patriarchal society, the socio-cultural restrictions and stereotypes played a major role in silencing the voice of women and left no choice rather to be dependent on others for their own life-decisions. Girl children were facing early dropouts from schools due to early marriages, to manage house-hold chores, to agricultural work or to take care of their siblings. Such unfinished education was gradually pushing them towards functional illiteracy and their less productivity also affected the development of society and the state. Non-traditional ways were introduced to improve this condition.

Non-formal Education was a unique way to provide skilful knowledge to them which didn't demand literacy on the first place due to its verbal and participatory classes along with the vibrant range of courses available for each individual regardless of one's age and occupation [11]. Traces of such practices were found in the former attempts to teach women through the Zenana education i.e., guidance at home [12]. In a country where even men were not educated in formal ways, the condition of oppression and poverty refrained from the thought of 'possibility of a better life' for women after getting education. It became necessary to fulfil the survival needs by enhancing their life skills i.e., coming out from their home space, getting along with peers and participation in events together helped them not only in boosting their self-confidence and self-esteem which eventually increased the chances of retaining in literacy courses after the enrolment [13]. Women were preferably selected for the

instructor positions in case of their availability for which condensed courses were recommended for girls. The NFE centres were planned to be arranged for the implementation of the desired project in non-educationally backward states, to be monitored and to be provided grant accordingly. It was made sure that the incentives given to girls, children of SC/ST in formal education, the same could be made available in Non-formal education along with the free textbooks and stationery to all pupils. Moreover, the characteristics of NFE i.e., flexibility of timing, diversity of courses made classes more suitable and approachable to the people of every age of people from working classes^[14].

Policies Stressing Non-Formal Education for The Enhancement in The Status of Women

The limited educational progress and social transformation of British era partially came under control of Indians between 1921 and 1947 but the full control was attained only after Independence. Even almost after two decades, there was absence of a solid plan for total education system in society, no alternative apart from formal education i.e. ignorance of incidental and Non-formal ways of education and even no advance features were added in formal educational system^[15]. The report of education commission 1964-66 discussed two programmes bifurcated with age differences were present in which first was concerned with the age group of 11 to 14 years old and the second was concerned with 15 to 30 years old^[16]. Government was encouraging local bodies for the management of Non-formal education by giving support of literature and reading materials. As functional literacy based on farmers' training in selected areas helped 30% women in 3 lakh persons, expected to be 40-50% in Fifth Five Year Plan. Dry farming and family planning were expected to be included. Such facilities needed to be extended for others too with additional programs of family life education, health, nutrition, child care, craft and self-employment for the latter. This approach of Non-formal education was towards the direction of establishing equality among gender by incorporating men in the joint responsibility of family management, food habits, education etc^[17], which was already stressed in university education commission 1949^[18].

Family, the unit of society where women were working whole day and this daily-schedule left no time for their own development. It was due to the socially constructed trend that private domain was expected to be managed by women while public domain by men. But before the industrialisation, the south Asian countries had less demarcation between both of these domains due to the co-operation in production and reproduction took place altogether in houses. But the industrialisation had separated these two domains with sharper distinctions where women got non-payable private domain^[19]. So, it became important to extend the area of vocational training for women as per the requirements of industrial and market potentials of regions^[20]. The NFE was fruitful due to its flexibility of timing, relevance of curriculum and instructional methods, diversification of the courses and their supplementation by vocational education and decentralisation in management structure and financial powers^[21].

The arrangement of more engaging classroom environment for learners, co-operative teachers (local instructors would be preferable) with common experiences were preferred.

Such teachers were accepted by to the community preferably from the weaker section of society, on the basis of knowledge experiences of their field to share with everybody rather than hiring any professional^[22]. The emphasis was on the Reading and basic arithmetical skills. The target was to cover a mass number of people. So, the NFE needed to be continued on a long run with a view to supplement the other efforts done in the welfare of non-privileged persons in India and abroad^[23].

A Pilot Project for Literacy Civic Education for Women in 1986, carried out in co-operation with UNESCO, in some places mostly in U.P. yielded good results by imparting training to the 30000 women who know their civic rights, got ready for the employment and some took primary school certificate examinations^[24]. Afterward, the scheme of Non-formal education of 1988 was one of the efforts made by Indian government for the assistance to voluntary agencies working for elementary age-group children under the programme of universalisation of elementary education with the help of experimental and innovative Programmes. Advanced technological tools i.e., solar packs, radio-cassettes and high-quality learning materials were provided. Flexible timing, a variety of courses and various activities along with the decentralisation of the implementing agencies provided accommodative models as per the need of locality helped it to sustain at a place for a long span of time^[25]. It was developed as a large and systematic programme of Non-formal education for children of habitations without schools, working children and girls who cannot attend whole-day schools, to universalise elementary education (UEE) by 1995^[26]. Bihar Education project was prepared under which Mahila Samakhya yojna was carried successfully via collective group of women known as Sakhis and Sahyoginis^[27]. The socially and educationally backward women were helped by these voluntary groups by taking their local problems to the state level organization and made plans accordingly.

Reflection on Bihar

The negligence and apathy towards formal education provided by colonial government (on limited scale), fear of conversion from missionary schools led people of Bihar away for a long time from such kind of systematic education. After Independence, the economy of Bihar left private and state expenditure a very limited scope along with the social reasons which widened the literacy gap between men and women. The literacy rate also differed with regional disparities i.e., south of Ganges were better off than those located north of the river^[28].

The condition of female literacy was a matter of concern for both state and central government as the literacy rate of male and female was 37.9 and 8.7 respectively i.e. approximately 4:1 in 1961^[29]. The non-traditional methods i.e., Non-formal education needed be introduced to complement formal schooling, put forward in the report of Kothari Commission (1964-66) in order to overcome the increasing illiteracy, to decrease the literacy gap, to give access of secondary and higher education to the poorer classes of society and with better provision of adult education^[30]. Adult education Programme was started to mitigate illiteracy and for early and effective social change^[31], required a favourable socio-economic-political atmosphere for its successful implementation as the Non-formal educational programmes but the political restlessness

of 1970s arose serious issues of survival, of law and order, of rising prices, of shortages and management of resources [32]. On top of that, the caste politics in Bihar heated after the report of Mandal Commission formed under Article 15(4) and 16(4) which recommended 20% reservation for OBCs and 3% reservation for women. The acceptance of this report in October 1978, gave rise to agitation and controversies broadened while the implementation of the policies [33]. The decadal increasing in female literacy was 5.56 per cent in the state during 1971-81, which made the complete female literacy estimation would cross twentieth century [34]. By Non-formal Educational Scheme 1988, government agencies, educational institutions, panchayati raj institutions, registered societies, public trusts and non-profit making companies became eligible for assistance under certain fixed criteria [35]. The implementation of the policies made by government and non-government organisations based on local necessities which made the role of voluntary agencies important. Such voluntary agencies were getting grant-in-aid for the duration of their entire project but this duration could not exceed over five years [36]. A case study of Mahila Samakhya part of the BEP (Bihar Education Project) started in 1991, funded by UNICEF work with 120 full-time Sahayoginis (activists responsible for approximately 10 villages) and more than 2000 trained Sakhis (village-level women activists/leaders) and more than 20,000 women in village collectives. Some special programmes named Jag-Jag for which events like “Maa-Beti Melas” organised every year in November-December-January boosted enrolments, retention of girls in schools. They also tried to improvise irregularities of teachers in schools i.e., their daily attendance or late comings etc. Kishori-jag Jagi (for girls over 15) and Mahila Jag-Jagi (for women) Training programmes developed by BEP were used for NFE/Adult instructors (whether male/female). The jag-jagi teachers were called ‘Sahelis’. Mahila Shikshan Kendra (MSKs) under Samakhya karyakram was suspected for malpractices and women related with it were tried to harass and threatened by bullies. The widespread cynicism was reported which made the things difficult for any good institute to run in Bihar [37]. Other issues were concerning lesser budget and feminization of poverty due to the consistent fewer schooling opportunities for young women or girls. As socio-cultural factors prioritized sons over daughter specially if parents could afford to teach a child and young women/ girls were mostly put to the domestic and agricultural tasks [38]. The indulgence in agricultural tasks was extreme that even in 2001, nearly half of the population of Bihar (48 per cent) was landless agricultural labourers and 29.3 per cent indulged in cultivation, a few were working in house-hold industry (3.9 per cent) with 18.8 per cent as other workers. 5-6 [39] It directly affected the enrolments and higher dropouts in case of girls from schools. The surveys of local schools in Bihar revealed that the lack of basic facilities like sanitation or drinking water, separate washrooms in schools was one of the discouraging factors of girls/women education [40].

The establishment of Women’s Development Corporation in 28 November 1991 under Dept. of Social welfare; Government of Bihar was an important step towards ensuring the empowerment of women and child in the state by formulating, promoting and implementing those schemes in Bihar [41]. No doubt NGOs (Non-governmental organisations) were playing complementary roles in advancing public perspective towards education for women

by explaining concerned benefits from it with the help of its regional network like Sakhis. ‘Sakhis’ (a group of women) from Samakhya Mahila Programme worked as the medium to connect the voices of village women education committee to the state level gatherings for the policy formulation as per their needs. Many women got confidence with their fellow teammates and non-judgemental surroundings [42] Funding, mass-media and provided facilities attracted more women in this effort [43]. But one of the concerning problems related to the voluntary groups was the identification of NGOs as some of working members or sometimes the whole NGO had suspicious connections with Naxalite groups. There were many registered NGOs with such dubious connections listing top in Bihar. Moreover, voluntary organisations of Bihar worked separately due to caste, religious and ideological differences which made complexities to set any parameter for such organisations or to set the eligibility criteria for members concerning to it [44].

It was noticed that educational expansion in Bihar was faster in first three decade than the 80s and 90s. The support in uplifting the educational status was provided through central scheme of Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched to spread elementary education between the age-group 6-14 years in 2000-01. This scheme was a good initiative in establishing equality between rich and poor, and men and women along with generating economy by helping the developing country with education and health facilities [45].

Three Terms: Non-formal Education, Literacy and functional illiteracy:

- Non-formal Education (NFE) refers to the education which is flexible way of imparting knowledge tailored as per the need of an individual or a specific group of people, offers courses related to practical world, vocational trainings and workshops from well-versed trainers/ skilled persons in a particular field i.e. Painting, gym, art and crafts. Likewise, women learn how to do house-hold chores, nurturing children or tasks related to agriculture, cottage or village industries in Non-formal education [1].
- Literacy is the learning process to understand how to apply the learned lessons in practical life to make it smoother.
- “Functional illiteracy is the basic literacy and numeracy skills which could not be utilise in work making the sustainable development difficult [2].

Conclusion

Though initial concerns regarding the education of women were taken in colonial era, the significant steps for their education became possible only after Independence of India. The socially and educationally backward women were helped by the government/non-government organisations i.e., voluntary organisations, NGOs and panchayati raj etc. under the Non-formal education programme which was started to support formal education. No doubt, the educational institutions did well in this field but it was considered a challenging task to spread literacy among women in many of the places in Bihar. The widespread cynicism prevented the development of any good institutions and the remaining unsolved issues i.e., extreme poverty, extreme dominance on women due to patriarchal thoughts, women’s dependence on men for most of their needs, the non-credibility of voluntary organisations along with complexity in the detection and removal of the

connection of non-social groups in disguise of legal organisations, put girls/women educational status in miserable conditions.

Reference

1. Naik JP. Non-formal Education in India (New Delhi: S. Chand & Company, 1979), 1979, 223-224.
2. Ballara Marcela. Women and literacy (Women ad world development series. Zed books Ltd. 1992), 1992, 17.
3. Nurullah Syed, J.P. Naik JP. "History of Education in India: During the British Period." (Bombay, Macmillan, 1943), 1943, 110.
4. Basin Kamla. Understanding Gender (New Delhi: Kali for Women,2000), 2000, 7.
5. Ibid., p.36.
6. Forbes Geraldine. Women in Modern India: The New Cambridge History of India, IV.2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1996, 33.
7. Ibid. p.35-36.
8. P. Ghosh, Prabhat, Rana kumar. Elementary Education in Bihar Progressand. Cahllenges, Centre for economic Policy and public finance (Asian Development Research Institute) p. 2
9. The Report of Mandal commission, 1980, 7.
10. The Report of Kothari Commission report, 1964-66, 423.
11. Naik JP.Ibid. p.224.
12. Forbes Geraldine. Ibid. p. 40.
13. Ballera Marcela. Ibid., pp.17,19 and 24.
14. The Report of Non-formal Education, 1988, 2,4, 10 & 16.
15. Naik JP.Ibid., p. 226.
16. The Report of education commission, 1964-66, 426.
17. Committee on the status of Women in India. TowardsEquality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India. (New Delhi: Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Government of India, 1974), 1974, 280.
18. The Report of University Education Commission, Part I (New Delhi: Government of India) p. 347.
19. Basin Kamla. Ibid., p.39.
20. Nurullah Syed, JP Naik, JP Ibid., p. 280.
21. The Report of Non-formal Education 1988, (New Delhi: Government of India) p. 16.
22. Nurullah Syed, JP Naik, JP Ibid., 281 Ballara Marcela. Ibid., p. 30.
23. Nurullah Syed, JP Naik, JP Ibid., p.281.
24. Ballara Marcela. Ibid., 22
25. The Report of Non-formal Education, 1988, 16 & 29.
26. Ibid., p. 44.
27. P. Ghosh, Prabhat, Rana, kumar. p.14.
28. Women reading the world, Policies and Practices of Literacy in Asia, edited by Carolyn Medel-Anonuevo, (UNESCO Institute for Education, Hambur) p. 59.
29. P. Ghosh, Prabhat, Rana, kumar. Ibid., p. 12.
30. Naik JP Ibid., p. 228.
31. The Report of Non-formal education, 1988, 228.
32. Naik JP Ibid., p. 233-234.
33. The Report of Mandal Commission, 1980, 7.
34. Census of India 1961, series-4, part XII, 1961, 152.
35. The Report of Non-formal Education, 1988, 45.
36. Ibid., p.9.
37. Womenreading the world, p. 59-62.
38. Ballera, Marcella. Ibid., p.1.
39. P. Ghosh, Prabhat, Rana, kumar Ibid., p. 39.
40. Datta, Amrita, Rustagi, Preeti, Status of Womenin Bihar: Exploring Transformation in Workand Gender Relations (Institute for human Development) www.ihdindia.org.p.13.
41. <https://wcdc.bihar.gov.in>
42. Womenreading the world, Ibid., p. 60.
43. Ballara, Marcela. Ibid. p.20-21.
44. Kumar, Anant. NGOs in Bihar: Voluntary sector and its credibility International NGO journal Vol.2(4):083.
45. Ghosh, Prabhat P.and kumar Rana. Ibid., p. 15.