EDUCATION AND MODERNITY OF WOMEN:
A STUDY OF BENGALI WOMEN

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS
The year 1975 was declared the International Women's Year by the UNESCO. The following decade, which has just ended, was termed the International Decade for Women. The period was marked by intense campaigns for women's welfare all over the world. Statesmen, politicians, planners and academicians rose to the occasion by suggesting new policies and socio-economic, and cultural measures to eradicate age-old disparities between men and women which have been a common feature of most of the countries of the world. The objectives of the United Nations Decade for Women, as declared in a World Conference held in Mexico City, in 1975, were to achieve equality of women and to recognize their contribution to
development and peace\(^1\). The Programme of Action drawn up for the Second half of the Decade, i.e., 1980-85, gave special emphasis on employment, health and education for women, taking a note of the unequal position of women in the spheres of family, employment and politics\(^2\). It was observed that women are generally 'restricted' to the 'domestic sphere', and often regarded and treated as 'inferior and unequal in their activities outside the domestic sphere'. Further, they have 'suffered violation of their human rights', and have been given 'only limited access to resources and participation in all spheres of life, notably in decision-making'\(^3\).

The actual impact of such programmes and pronouncements on the quality of life of the women community, the world over, is yet to be perceived. But these have, beyond doubt, focused the attention of academicians and planners on certain key areas of the women's lives. Particularly, the vast lag in women's education, in terms of both quantity and quality,


compared to men's, and its consequences for their social, economic and political status, has, for the first time, received world-wide attention 4.

India, a member of the United Nations Organization, and committed to the Programme of Action of the International Decade For Women, has her own contingent of women with their specific problems. While they have made some progress in different spheres of life since Independence, and specially during the last decade, they are struggling to achieve much more that is due to them. They have been given various social, economic and political rights, in theory. For example, the Constitution of free India provides for equality between the sexes in different spheres of social life. Women have also got an access to all levels of education. Since India's Independence in 1947, female education has spread considerably. But, despite all these achievements, the number of educated women in India is small. West Bengal, one of the more enlightened provinces of India, with its record of achievements in the sphere of women's education, also has little room for complacency. Moreover, mere quantitative expansion of education, without a

change in its quality and content, can hardly equip women with the knowledge and skill, required for their enjoying the rights and opportunities which the Constitution promises.

In the foregoing chapters, we have tried to present a profile of educated women of West Bengal. For this purpose, we have probed into their role and status in family, in the sphere of employment, and in politics. Our concern has been to see if formal education (both higher and lower levels) contributes to changing the quality of life of women in these three spheres. Besides, we have tried to relate education to changes in women's attitudes, self-perceptions and consciousness, in West Bengal. The changes together constitute the syndrome of women's modernity, as we have shown in Chapter 1. Hence, we may now present, in brief, our overall findings on the relationship between education and modernity of Bengali women.

II

Turning our attention to the impact of education on the objective conditions of Bengali women in the family, in the employment market and also in the field of politics, we find that it has elevated the status of women in each of these spheres, on a modest scale.
In the family, education, especially higher education, has enabled them to enjoy a relatively high status. Educated women have some say in the selection of their life-partners in case of arranged marriage. Higher education in co-educational institutions has encouraged romantic marriage at a mature age. Moreover, education, and the employment opportunities it brings, have enabled women to be married off, limiting the pressure of dowry. The voices of educated and employed women now count in decision-making relating to family matters. The educated women are also conversant with the legal provisions which protect their interests. Educated women who are employed as well, do avail themselves of those, if necessary.

Education has a direct impact on the position of Bengali women in the employment market. In the competitive job-market, educated women have an edge over their illiterate counterparts. Moreover, those who have received higher education, are coming to high status occupations which enable them to enjoy high status both in family and society. Even, women with lower level of education, enjoy a relatively high status in family, provided they get employed.

Education has also, to some extent, raised the political status of Bengali women. Women Ministers, legislators and leaders of various political parties are generally found to be educated.
Besides, a small section of young women are receiving their initial training in politics, in the higher educational institutions of West Bengal.

Although, education has made some changes in the objective conditions of women, these are far from satisfactory. These changes do not lead to a qualitative transformation of the material conditions of the women as a whole. The following observations may prove our contention.

In the family, the objective conditions of educated Bengali women have not changed much. Women are still generally subordinated to the male members in the family, no matter whether they are educated or not. They are still being made dowry victims. Assault, repression and even killing of educated housewives have become daily news. Educated women are yet to achieve an identity of their own, independently of that of their fathers, husbands or fathers-in-law. Educated but unemployed women get little scope to assert themselves in the family. The position of working women in the family is also not satisfactory. They have to bear dual burdens of home and the place of work outside.

In the employment market, share of educated women leaves much to be desired. The proportion of women in white-collar occupations is pitifully low. Discrimination is often made between males and females in the job market. Employed women have been mostly restricted to positions of secretaries, typists, sales girls, air hostesses, nurses etc. A sizeable section of educated women are engaged in teaching, mostly in schools. The impact of education upon women's getting high status occupations is minimal. Very few of them have joined such occupations which raise their social esteem.

In the field of politics, education, even higher education, has failed to raise the status of Bengali women. Educated Bengali women are either politically passive, or, where they are active through participation in political parties or organizations, they generally play second fiddle to the male members. The women's organizations, which are exclusively controlled and led by women, are free from male-domination, but then, as political structures, they are not very effective in West Bengal. Moreover, such organizations have not

---

been able to mobilize their own resources politically, to put an end to the unequal treatment meted out to them in various spheres of life. It has, therefore, been rightly observed that despite education and entry into professions, politics is an area where women have hardly made a dent.

Let us now sum up the findings of our survey concerning the impact of education on the subjective perceptions of women in three spheres, viz., family, employment and politics.

Educated women have changed their attitude with regard to family. They are, in large numbers, favourably disposed towards romantic marriage, late marriage, widow remarriage and divorce or legal separation, in case of maladjustment with husbands. A large majority of them support family planning. Many of them also support women's economic self-sufficiency as a guarantee to their being treated with dignity and honour in the family. The attitude of educated women has remained traditional only with regard to living in the joint family and also accepting the religious form of marriage.

Similarly, education, especially higher education, has prompted women to look forward to employment opportunities. Educated

women look upon employment as the goal of education. Only married and lower educated women among them, do not always see the connection between education and employment. Education has also made women conscious of the fact that employment is a means to raising their status, both in the family and the society. Lower educated women appear to be uncertain as to whether employment also raises the status of women in the larger society. Educated women also look upon employment, which assures economic self-sufficiency, as a key to their overall emancipation. Here again, we find that the higher the level of education, the greater is the extent of changes in the attitude of Bengali women. Lower educated women, in large numbers, still prefer housewifery under the protective care of the husbands, to the hazards of working outside the home. An interesting phenomenon which we have come across in our survey is that even many higher educated Bengali women are not willing to take up jobs, provided their families are financially stable.

The changing attitude of educated women, with regard to politics, have been found to be a bit paradoxical. First, majority of both the higher and lower educated respondents want to form new organizations for solving local problems (which we take to be a measure of their participatory orientation). But
a majority of them do not take part in any political campaigns, and very few of them read political literature regularly. Some among the higher educated, and a large section of the lower educated respondents, even do not like to discuss politics with their friends and relatives. Thus, through such responses, they betray a generally non-participatory orientation. Secondly, without showing any eagerness for their political participation, a majority of the higher and lower educated respondents appear to be approving women's participation in politics. But the paradoxes apart, educated women have, beyond doubt, acquired political consciousness and developed some interest in political affairs. The gulf between the attitudes of higher educated respondents and those of lower educated respondents is here manifest.

From our survey, we find that education has, to a large extent, made the Bengali women modern in their subjective perceptions, their values, preferences and self-estimations. Side by side, we note that education has failed to modernize their ideas fully. Educated Bengali women have remained traditional in their attitude in a few aspects of life. We observe a blend of traditional and modern values among Bengali women. Again, the change is more widespread in case of the higher educated women. From this, we may draw the conclusion that the higher the leve
of education, the greater is the incidence of Bengali women's modernity.

But, from the findings of our study, we are also led to the conclusion that such changes in the subjective perceptions of educated Bengali women are not accompanied by the changes in their objective conditions. In fact, education has created a gap between the objective conditions of women on the one hand, and their subjective self-perceptions, on the other. While the former have been changing very slowly, the latter have made a rapid advance. As a result, educated Bengali women now stand half way between tradition and modernity.

Let us now analyze why education has failed to bring about any major change in the material conditions of women in West Bengal, and also how, as a result, the attitude of educated women has not been fully modern in all respects.

First, the culture of male supremacy and male domination (patriarchal ideology) has nullified, to a great extent, the impact of education on women's modernity. Even in an enlightened and
educationally advanced society, one comes across very few men who sincerely believe that "men and women actually become human in relation to each other and if one sex is denigrated as a sex then humanity itself is the loser". The culture of male superiority is encountered all over the world. Awareness of, and protest against this culture have been expressed by women through the vast array of cross-cultural, feminist literature, published from time to time.

This culture of masculine superiority permeates social life in West Bengal too and feminine protest coming from educated Bengali women is still feeble. Male members assume the air of...


superiority vis-a-vis women in the family, in the employment market and also in the field of politics. Family, the primary socializing agency, is the breeding ground of patriarchal ideology in West Bengal. The art of subjugating women is acquired by male members in the family. Education, especially higher education, makes women aware of their individuality and self-identity, but the prevailing culture dwarfs their personality and induces them to accepting the authority of their fathers, brothers, husbands and fathers-in-law. The culture of inequality also characterizes the relationship between men and women as employees, comrades-in-arms in trade unions and politics. Here, we find that the roles are equal, but the persons are not.

It has been observed that in Calcutta, educated women who are in different professions often feel that their husbands resent their self-confidence, and their success in career. Mahasveta Devi, a noted Bengali novelist, expresses herself on this point more curtly, in an interview with a columnist of the Statesman, Calcutta. According to her, husbands resist all the way wife's success at work. Among couples in the most cultured or progressive circles, may be seen terrible instances of bullying, denigrating, and generally repressing the working wife.

This desire to dominate the women comes from a feudal mental make-up.\textsuperscript{11}

Secondly, lack of economic self-sufficiency also accounts for the degraded social status of women, despite education. Men and women alike enjoy the right to education but they are not guaranteed the right to work. In a situation of acute unemployment which prevails in India and haunts West Bengal no less, educated women are outpaced by their male counterparts in the competitive job market. Many educated Bengali women are forced to remain unemployed, and consequently, they feel the pinch of their dependence on some one else for their maintenance.

It is true that even employed women have to face various odds. They also suffer from an excessive workload caused by 'role-extensions', and they might suffer harassment on way to, or in the working place, because of their sex. But then, they have the satisfaction of being self-sufficient and self-supporting. The following observation, made by the author of \textit{The Second Sex}, would testify to the significance of such independence for a woman:

"If the difficulties are more evident in case of the independent woman, it is because she has chosen battle rather than resignation. All the problems of life find a solution in death;"

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid
a woman who is busy with living is therefore more at variance with herself than is she who buries her will and her desires, but the former will not take the latter as a standard. She considers herself at a disadvantage only in comparison with men.\textsuperscript{12}

Educated women's lack of employment opportunities in West Bengal, or in any part of India has less to do with education than with the imperfections of the economy. The sexual division of labour in India, which puts women at a disadvantage, is part of the unequal division of labour on the larger economic plane. Since Independence, planned economic development has been attempted on a gigantic scale. But its fruits are yet to reach all sections of society. Middle-class educated Bengali women find it hard to take part in gainful economic activities, the scope of which is extremely limited.

Thirdly, callousness of the Indian political system (and West Bengal is a part of India's federal, pluralist political set up) to the special problems of women, sets the modernizing impact of education on women to naught. The Government of India, and the various State Governments alike, overlook the factors which humiliate women, even educated women. The Government of

India has taken the initiative to equalize the status of women through making some laws. But there are numerous loopholes in these laws which make their violations rather easy. Political parties, trade unions and their male leaders also show little awareness about their own sex biases. Political parties sometimes show readiness to sacrifice the interests of women for narrow political ends.

Fourthly, the hold of tradition is yet to be removed from the socio-cultural set up and also from the minds of men and women, in West Bengal. Education has no doubt intervened and helped change the attitudes and ideas of the younger generation of women. But then Bengali women's exposure to modernity through education gets compromised to some extent in so far as they imbibe old values from the elder members of the family and the community. The fear of ostracism, or of offending the sentiments of one's kith and kin, prevents an educated woman from violating traditional norms and practices which she has rejected on principle. Thus educated Bengali women are forced to adopt double standards in life, compromising their modernity even in its narrow, subjective connotation. Some traditional values are sought to be preserved for holding the social fabric in tact. Myths, fables, stories, dramas and films are often utilized for this purpose. Educated women,
torn between the pulls of tradition and modernity, find a way out by adopting the postures of modernity, in the ideological or academic spheres, while letting their real life situations conform to the traditional image of womanhood.

Religiosity is another mental trait of an average Bengali woman, no matter whether she is educated or not. Religion also provides the bridge between the older and the younger generations of women, who begin to share a common orientation to life, hardly consistent with the secular, rational outlook that education is expected to foster among young women.

It may be noted in this connection that generally male members decide the norms and behavioural patterns of women in a society where tradition still holds sway. In India, and also no less in West Bengal, a certain ambivalence characterizes male attitude towards womanhood. Even modern professional outlooks of male members are often influenced by stronger traditional values, particularly in their relationships with women.


14 Ibid., p.177.
Fifthly, sex bias in the content, curricula, and in the manner of imparting, of education itself, is largely responsible for its failure to change the quality of life of women. This phenomenon has been recognized internationally by scholars and academicians. In India, women's traditional role has been reinforced by the ideas and values, imparted through education which is biased towards the male sex. Most of the committees and commissions on women's education, formed during the post-independence period, have highlighted the issue of sex bias in school curriculum.

They have pointed out that school curriculum not only hides women's contribution to various fields but also projects them as being inferior to men and that it reflects and strengthens traditional prejudices of inequality between two sexes. They have also objected to the division of subjects on the basis of

'masculine' and 'feminine', as unscientific. The Committee on the Differentiation of Curricula for Boys and Girls (1964) recommended that one of the important values to be built up through textbooks is to enable each sex to develop a proper respect towards the other. Notwithstanding the findings and recommendations of these committees and commissions, however, sex bias has continued to vitiate school education in India. Textbooks, written for school students contain such bias in subtler forms. As has been observed, these books exhibit a division of labour 'frighteningly close to that of feudal societies', portraying boys as courageous, capable achiever,
dominant in decision-making situations, and girls as submissive, subservient, passive and incapable of performing certain roles.

In terms of quantity, there is a noticeable gap between the numbers of boys and girls at different levels of education. Particularly in higher education, which has a direct bearing on the modernity of women, their enrolment is not equal to men's. Besides, the type of education they receive, or opt for, is also qualitatively different from that of the boys, and does little to alter their subsidiary status in the family or in the occupational structure. Another point which has been noted in connection with the shortcomings of the present system of education is the inferior position of girls and young women in it, especially in the vocational training system. This accounts for 'the deterioration of the female role in the labour market', which affects women's status adversely.

in a rapidly changing world\textsuperscript{19}.

We have noted in Chapter 2 that the number of Bengali women receiving education is small; and only a small fraction of them go in for higher education. As a result, the modernizing impact of education has got involuted rather than dispersed. Secondly, in West Bengal, as in the rest of India, vocational training for women has received scant attention so far. Nursing (for lower educated) and teaching (for higher educated) constitute the only areas in which vocational training is imparted to women. The rest are male-dominated, by and large. We have also noted that in colleges and universities, girl students are mostly enrolled in humanities, rather than science and commerce subjects.

The content of education also fails to make women specially aware of their own conditions in society. Syllabi for sociology, and the text-books prescribed for the same, do not highlight the problems of women. No special studies on women have been introduced, to our knowledge, in any higher educational institution, in West Bengal, although women scholars

and intellectuals have been conducting researches on women's problems at their individual initiative.

Finally, we take note of the fact that Bengali women are passing through a transitional phase in their lives. Traditional ideas and institutions have been losing their hold. New values and social relationships centering around those are attracting Bengali women. Education plays no small a part in this process of transition. But the culture of protest and non-conformism is not radical enough to break the tradition-modernity continuum in the lives of women, even educated women of West Bengal. This has been confirmed by the findings of our study of both the objective conditions and the mental make-ups of educated Bengali women.

These, then, are some of the intervening factors and forces, which have upset the simple correlation between education and modernity of women in West Bengal.

IV

We began this study with a tentative hypothesis that education of women leads to their modernity. In course of exploring the data, we have come across a very complex pattern of
relationship between education and modernity. While diagnosing the various disabilities inflicted on the women of West Bengal, we have also tried to analyze the manifold imperfections of the educational system itself, which, in our view, frustrate the cause of modernity of women. There is little doubt that education contains some potentials for change in the life situations of women. But a change in the larger social ambience is all the more necessary for proper realization of such potentials. All movements including those for educational reforms, which aim at changing the conditions of women have to be linked up inseparably with social-class battles for restructuring the economy, society and polity. Similarly, all movements for social regeneration have to take up the specific cause of women. Unless viewed in such a

20 As Juliet Mitchell puts it, "nobody is exempt from the structure and implications of class nor of patriarchy. No women's liberation movement that denies the class struggle and no class struggle that underplays the oppression of women, can be a fully revolutionary force. No analysis that ignores the basis of women's specific oppressions is a revolutionary analysis". Juliet Mitchell, 'Women's Liberation, Marxism and the Socialist Family', in Bhikhu Parekh (ed.), The Concept of Socialism, Ambika Publications, New Delhi, 1976, p.230.
broad perspective, modernity of women will remain an ever elusive goal in our society.

Before we conclude, a few tentative suggestions on the short-term and long-term measures for bringing about modernity of women in India as a whole and in West Bengal in particular, are offered and some future areas of inquiry are pinpointed.

The process of modernization of women's life is time consuming. But, in view of the complicated circumstances in which women find themselves, we may suggest some short-term measures so that they can assert equal rights with men.

1. Economic emancipation of women is the most important precondition for their enjoying an equal status in different spheres of life. Hence, women should be encouraged to acquire economic self-sufficiency by all means, without regarding marriage as the goal of life. Career-orientation is necessary for women's modernity. They should be socialized in family and other secondary associations accordingly. Spread of education among all sections of women is necessary so as to open up suitable employment opportunities for them. The content of education and the manner of imparting it must be so as to motivate women towards building up a career of their own. A change in the attitude of parents is necessary so that they
donot discriminate between a son and a daughter while providing for their education.

2. It is necessary, on the part of the Government, to take care that where both males and females are equally suitable for employment, no practical discrimination is made between them just on ground of sex. The Government should make proper arrangements so that women can get equal opportunities for all types of vocational training.

3. The employers should provide living quarters to their women employees. The provision of creches for working women is required for reducing the burden of child rearing, and mitigating working women's mental tension regarding their children.

4. Laws enacted for the betterment of the conditions of women have to be properly and rigorously implemented by the Government, and all the loopholes in such legislative measures be plugged forthwith. Violation of such laws must also be brought to book.

5. The press, radio, television and films must be made to play a vital role in propagating the values with regard to male-female parity.

Now, we may suggest some long-term measures for bringing about
changes in the status of women, and making them modern in the fullest sense of the term.

1. Modernization of the national economy, restructuring of economic-relationships, and also the economic self-sufficiency of the country is essential for women's modernity. Only the fully modernized economy can enable women to enter into the job market by guaranteeing the right to work of each and all.

2. Like economic modernization, India's socio-cultural modernization, ensuring the growth of rational-secular outlook and opposition to various superstitions and age-old beliefs is necessary. The refusal to accept those traditional institutions which militate against male-female parity is equally essential. Social reformers in general, and, leaders of women's organizations in particular, must wage relentless battle against the hold of patriarchal ideology in different spheres of Indian social life. Religious interference in the secular domain of women's rights and freedoms should be done away with.

3. There should be no gap between men's and women's education, in terms of quantity. The difference between masculine and feminine subjects for imparting education to boys and girls has to be abolished. The educational system must be
free from any sex prejudice. All educational institutions have to be kept opened for women. The educationists should consciously obliterate any biases in the content and curricula of education. Women's studies should be consciously incorporated in the curriculum, for propagating equality between the two sexes.

4. Political parties have to take special care to bring women in the forefront of politics and give them an equal share of decision-making power within the parties. Besides, male-female parity must be ensured in different political power structures.

5. The political system should give proper attention to the problems of women. It must remove the difficulties of women, arising out of socio-economic and cultural conditions. It can change the socio-economic structure and create an atmosphere where women will be able to modernize themselves.

6. Above all, educated women have to organize fellow women systematically and have to be more vocal about their demands. They should not move in isolation. Their movements must be tagged to the movements of all sections of women. Women as women suffer from various discriminations, irrespective of their levels of education. So, they will have to strike at the root of their exploitation unitedly.
The academic community in India was not totally indifferent to the problems of women. A number of scholarly writings were published on feminine issues even before 1975, the International Women's Year. The Government of India also set up committees to look into the status of women from time to time. The reports prepared by such committees further enriched the literature in this sphere. However, since 1975, there has been a flurry of women studies in India. Books, articles, editorials in the leading newspapers have been relentlessly focusing attention on the various aspects of the women's question in India. More heartening is the fact that educated women themselves have taken the lead in this matter.

West Bengal, with its relative progressivism of ideas is, however, yet to catch up with this new wave. The volume of studies on the conditions of women of West Bengal is relatively small. Quite a few areas of the lives of women have remained unexplored. We suggest a few areas of study, relating to the women of West Bengal, in the following:

i) Women's organizations in West Bengal: their ideology, objectives and strategies for fighting against women's oppression: Since, in West Bengal, women's organizations, affiliated to various radical political parties predominate, it will be interesting to inquire into their activities and leadership patterns.
ii) Changing attitudes and values of women labourers in both rural and urban areas of West Bengal: As the central focus of our study has been on educated women of West Bengal, we have mostly encountered women of middle class origin and background, with a few exceptions. It can be a more challenging task for researchers to inquire into the nature of responses of women of lower class origin (mostly illiterate and yet wage-earning), to various forces and processes of social change.

iii) Political parties and women in West Bengal: Such a study may focus mainly on the responses and performances of political parties relating to feminine issues.