

A strange paradox for Indian women

Better education is not leading to better job opportunities, marriage prospects or freedom of movement



SONALDE DESAI

Abigail Adams, wife of the second President of the U.S. and mother of the sixth President, wrote to her husband, “If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion.” As last year’s #MeToo movement and Sabarimala protests showed, perhaps Indian women are echoing her and are ready to foment a rebellion.

Education and employment

What fuels these movements? Could it be that the very success of India’s economic transformation brings with it a stark realisation that it has not paid particular care and attention to women? The most promising sign of the improving conditions of Indian women lies in declining inequality in education. In all villages and towns, mornings and afternoons are brightened by the smiling faces of girls and young women, dressed in their uniforms, walking to school. Almost all girls go to primary school and, according to the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) of 2011-12, 70% of girls aged 15 to 18 are still studying, only five percentage points less than boys. They frequently out-perform boys. In 2018, in the Class XII CBSE examination, 88.31% girls passed, compared to 78.99% boys. However, in spite of rising education and rising aspirations, labour markets and social norms constrain women, almost as if they are all dressed up for a party with nowhere to go.

Data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and the IHDS show that education and employment have a U-shaped relationship. Illiterate women are most likely to participate in the workforce. Work participation drops sharply for women with primary and secondary education and rises only with college education. Research by Esha Chatterjee and colleagues in a paper published in the journal *Demographic Research*, using data from the IHDS, further documents that this relationship holds even after we take into account income of other members of the household, social background



“The most promising sign of the improving conditions of Indian women lies in declining inequality in education.” Schoolgirls in Karbi Anglong district, Assam.
• RITU RAJ KONWAR

and place of residence.

Employment opportunities that are open to their mothers, including farm labour and non-farm manual work in construction, hold little appeal to secondary school graduates who have invested their hopes in education. However, white-collar jobs are either not available or demand long hours and offer little job security in this time of a gig economy. NSSO data for 25- to 59-year-old workers in 2011-12 show that among farmers, farm labourers and service workers, nearly one-third are women, while the proportion of women among professionals, managers and clerical workers is only about 15%.

Young men with Class 10 or 12 education find jobs as mechanics, drivers, sales representatives, postmen and appliance repairmen. Few of these opportunities are available to women. Whether employers choose not to hire women in these positions or working conditions make for an inhospitable environment for young women is not clear. Educated women’s main employment options lie in qualifying as a nurse or a teacher or looking for office jobs.

The importance of marriage

If barriers to work participation are not enough, young women’s lives are also circumscribed by social norms that shape their family situation. Marriage remains the only acceptable fate for young women in India. Whereas a third of Japanese women and 11% of Sri Lankan women aged 30-34 are single, less than 3% of In-

dian women are single at that age. Moreover, women’s education does not seem to carry the same value in the ‘marriage market’ as caste, the family’s economic status and horoscope. Research from other countries shows that educated women marry similarly educated men. But in India, women frequently marry men with lower education than themselves. Zhiyong Lin and his colleagues at the University of Maryland find that whereas less than 5% women married men whose education was lower than themselves in the 1970s, the proportion has grown to nearly 20% recently.

If rising education for women does not offer increasing income-earning opportunities or better marriage prospects, does it at least give women greater autonomy in other areas of their lives? Based on recent National Family Health Survey data, there seems to be little evidence that a moderate level of education offers women a greater say in household decisions or freedom of movement outside the home. College graduates fare slightly better, but even for them, the difference is relatively small. For instance, 48% of women with no schooling do not go to a health centre alone; the proportion for college graduates is only slightly lower at 45%. This is a strange paradox. Parents make tremendous sacrifices to educate their daughters, and young women joyously work hard at school in search of a better life, only to have their aspirations frustrated by economic and social

barriers that restrict their opportunities. Is it surprising that periodically their frustration takes the shape of a social movement? What is surprising is that their demands are not more strident, and that no political party has chosen to espouse their cause.

Women’s vote

If women were a caste, their cause would be championed by political parties now trying to mobilise caste-based vote banks. We would see proposals for women’s quota in government jobs and higher education. If women were an economic class, we would see subsidies and a variety of other economic incentives showered on them. However, our political process sees women as an extension of the men in their households and assumes that no special effort is needed to win their hearts and minds.

Sociologist Raka Ray has presented a sophisticated analysis of the relationship between political parties and women’s movements. She has argued that in the 1980s and 1990s, the CPI(M) in West Bengal had an ambivalent relationship with its women’s wing, and domestic violence was seen as a function of class oppression, with frustrated, unemployed men beating up their wives. In more recent history, the discourse regarding marriage, divorce and inheritance has been co-opted by communal politics.

As we head into an election season, perhaps it would be wise for political parties to remember that women form half the voting population. The American experience is salutary in this regard. The 2018 House of Representatives elections in the U.S. that brought victory to the Democrats were shaped by the Democrats winning women’s votes by an overwhelming margin. According to the PEW Research Centre, Democrats won 59% of women’s vote as opposed to 40% for Republicans; among men, they won 51% versus the 47% won by Republicans. Let us hope that some political party will figure out that women are not simply extensions of their husbands and fathers and campaign on a platform that focuses on creating economic and social opportunities for women.

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A fight for the forest

Conservationists should protect the welfare of both wildlife and forest dwellers and stand up to bigger players

IRAVATEE MAJGAONKAR & BHANU SRIDHARAN

On February 28, the Supreme Court stayed its order on the eviction of lakhs of Adivasis and other forest dwellers whose claims were rejected under the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA). The court has asked State governments for a detailed report on whether due process was followed by gram sabhas and authorities under the FRA before claims were rejected. For millions of Adivasis and forest dwellers, the stay offers only a temporary relief. But it provides an opportunity to figure out how conservation movements can advocate both nature and social justice in India.

The petitioners had expressed concern over reports that showed deforestation and fragmentation of land after FRA implementation began. But there is a lack of peer-reviewed studies that quantify the extent of deforestation caused by marginalised communities in comparison to large industrial and infrastructural projects. It is vital that scientists and conservationists take up this task, as it is well known that the state is bestowing large companies with kindness and second chances despite severe legal violations during the planning, construction and operation stages of projects.

Ignoring the bigger players

Objections to the FRA are often framed as an issue of wildlife conservation versus people’s rights, with no mention of these bigger players who might benefit from this framing. In a 2013 study, professor Prakash Kashwan noted how political this framing can be. He wrote that in 2006, well before the FRA implementation started, the Environment Ministry directed State governments to declare all existing Protected Areas as critical tiger habitats, so that they would not be controlled under this Act. In 2012, the Ministry tried to remove critical tiger habitats from the purview of the National Board for Wildlife, purportedly to make diversion of forest land easier. Indeed, one must repeatedly question who gets access to forests when forest dwellers are evicted. In January, the Environment Ministry “cancelled” community forest rights given to Adivasi communities in Chhattisgarh’s Hasdeo Arand forest and handed over 2,000 acres of this forest to a coal mining company. We have seen instances of forest dwellers protecting these lands from destructive industries and negligent state forces. This is not to claim that forest dwellers have no impact on forests, but the FRA provides for that through critical wildlife habitats (CWH), spaces that can be de-

marcated to be inviolate as long as people’s rights are settled elsewhere. The petitioners in the FRA case are right where they express concern about the lack of progress in demarcating CWHs. It is crucial for forest departments to initiate this process in a time-bound manner in the interest of conservation.

Conservation rooted in justice

However, for conservation to truly be effective in the long run, it must also be rooted in justice. In a paper published in *Biological Conservation*, John A. Vucetich and others explore how to make conservation not just effective but also just. To do this, they argue, conservation actions must be based on the same principles as social justice.

Interestingly, the authors, all of whom are wildlife biologists, do not argue for an anthropocentric view of conservation. They rightly argue that if conservation calls for restriction of human activities in some way, that sacrifice must be made, except where doing so would result in injustice, especially to the most marginalised communities.

The court’s original eviction order had the potential to perpetrate such injustice. There are serious concerns about the rejection process, unfamiliarity with the language of the FRA, and outdated forest maps. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs has been urging district administrations to assist the process of granting rights by making maps and other data available to protect applicants from exploitation. The eviction order would not only have alienated marginalised people from their lands, but made wildlife conservation a symbol of an oppressive state. Large animals share areas with people outside Protected Areas too. Will people accept wildlife in their backyards without retaliation? We are not ready to handle the failure of shared spaces as a country, when only 5% of area is protected for wildlife and there is rampant land reallocation for non-forestry uses in other areas.

It is a relief that the court stayed its order. Hopefully this reinforces the fact that conservation cannot be about demanding unjust sacrifices from the weakest, while forest diversion by the powerful remains unchecked. Conservationists should stand up for the welfare of both wildlife and forest dwellers. This is the only way we can build an effective and equitable conservation movement.

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RITU RAJ KONWAR

SINGLE FILE

Tackling child malnutrition

Policy initiatives can be guided by collecting real-time data at the sub-district level

VENKATESAN RAMANI



REUTERS

Despite the National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS-4) showing an encouraging improvement in child nutrition, India continues to fare poorly in world rankings on child nutrition. What needs to be done, where, how and by whom are the questions we need answers to.

The focus must be on the pregnant, breastfeeding mother and the child, especially in the first two years of the child’s life, which is the crucial phase for physical, mental and cognitive development. Given the size of the problem (38% of children under five years of age are stunted, according to UNICEF) and budgetary constraints, a targeted approach is needed.

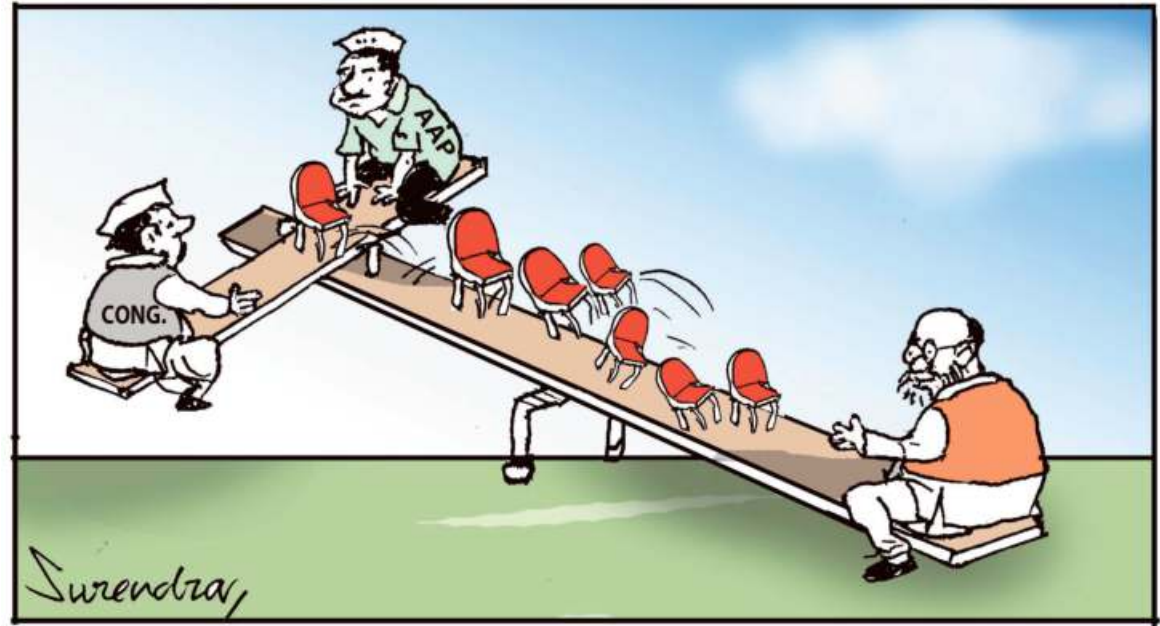
With the wealth of district-level data made available by NFHS-4, the focus districts can easily be identified. They are concentrated in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand. These States, and others such as Karnataka, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Gujarat, should formulate policies to tackle high incidence of stunting in these districts and provide funds for the same. Even within these districts, pockets where child malnutrition is high should be identified, going down to the tehsil or taluka levels and further down to clusters of Anganwadis located in areas such as urban slums and those with high concentrations of disadvantaged populations. Policy initiatives can be guided by accurate real-time data at the sub-district level.

We need more public programmes with a direct or indirect impact on nutrition in the selected areas. These should cover important nutrition-specific areas such as maternal nutrition, especially in the nine months of pregnancy and the six months of breastfeeding. They should also promote early and exclusive breastfeeding, proper feeding of the infant, and provide food security through a robust public distribution system.

There should be support for healthcare for mothers – from the antenatal care visit in the first trimester of pregnancy until after delivery – and for children in their first few years of life. Messages should be spread on hygiene and sanitation, particularly the need to do away with open defecation practices. Similarly, education for girls should be advocated, as should the importance of enabling the financial independence of women through skilling and employment opportunities along with their inclusion in the formal financial network.

Programmes will have an impact only when there are sound public service delivery mechanisms, especially in the nutrition, health and education sectors. Building a cadre of dedicated professionals in the government needs a high degree of political will and administrative commitment, centred around developing skills and knowledge and building motivation to stay the course.

The writer is a retired IAS officer



FAQ

Laying down the dos and don’ts of elections

How the model code of conduct evolved

DEVESH K. PANDEY

What is the model code of conduct?

The model code refers to a set of norms laid down by the Election Commission of India, with the consensus of political parties. It is not statutory. It spells out the dos and don’ts for elections. Political parties, candidates and polling agents are expected to observe the norms, on matters ranging from the content of election manifestos, speeches and processions, to general conduct, so that free and fair elections take place.

When was it introduced?

The EC traces its introduction to the 1960 Assembly elections in Kerala. During simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and Assemblies in several States in 1962, the EC circulated the code to all recognised parties, which followed it “by and large”. In October 1979, the EC came up with a comprehensive code that saw

further changes after consultations with parties.

When is the code enforced?

The code comes into force on the announcement of the poll schedule and remains operational till the process is concluded, as provided in the notification. It is also applicable to a “caretaker” government on premature dissolution of a State Assembly, as was the case in Telangana.

How is it enforced?

The EC ensures that ruling parties at the Centre and in States adhere to the code, as part of its mandate to conduct free and fair elections under Article 324 of the Constitution. In case of electoral offences, malpractices and corrupt practices like inducements to voters, bribery, intimidation or any undue influence, the EC takes action against violators. Anyone can report the violations to the EC or approach the

court. The EC has devised several mechanisms to take note of the offences, which include joint task forces of enforcement agencies and flying squads. The latest is the introduction of the cVIGIL mobile app through which audio-visual evidence of malpractices can be reported.

What are the key malpractices?

Any activity aggravating existing differences or creating mutual hatred or causing tension between different castes and communities, religious or linguistic, is a corrupt practice under the Representation of the People Act. Making an appeal to caste or communal feelings to secure votes and using places of worship for campaigning are offences under the Act. Bribery to voters is both a corrupt practice and an electoral offence under the Act and Section 171B of the Indian Penal Code. Intimidation of

voters is also an electoral offence, while impersonating them is punishable under the IPC. Serving or distributing liquor on election day and during the 48 hours preceding it is an electoral offence. Holding public meetings during the 48-hour period ending with the hour fixed for the closing of the poll is also an offence.

What restrictions does the code impose?

According to the EC, the code states that the party in power – whether at the Centre or in the States – should ensure that it does not use its official position for campaigning. Ministers and other government authorities cannot announce financial grants in any form. No project or scheme which may have the effect of influencing the voter in favour of the party in power can be announced, and Ministers cannot use official machinery for campaign purposes.

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 7, 1969

Bengal Governor skips portions of address

Despite shouts of protest from members of the ruling United Front, the undaunted but suave Governor of West Bengal, Mr. Dharma Vira, stuck to his guns and skipped over portions of the address prepared by the new Cabinet, constituted after the mid-term elections, when he delivered it opening the joint session of the two Houses of the State Legislature this afternoon [March 6, Calcutta]. A portion omitted by the Governor, a former senior Civilian, referred to the “peremptory and unconstitutional manner” in which the First United Front Ministry was dismissed and the “unseemly haste with which a minority Government of defectors was installed in power.” As the Governor, who dismissed the former United Front Ministry after a constitutional crisis, skipped over the portion critical of his action, the Chief Minister, Mr. Ajoy Kumar Mukherjee, made a feeble protest and asked the Governor to read the text of the address in full. Pat came the reply from the Governor, “Ajoy Babu, I have already told you that I will not do it.”

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 7, 1919.

Demobilisation in India: Mr. Churchill's Statement.

In the House of Commons at question time [February 25] Mr. Churchill stated that the Army Council had for some time been giving earnest attention to the question of the withdrawal of Territorials from India. Mr. Churchill emphasised that if a large proportion of the personnel which was due for relief were withdrawn without replacement the garrisons would be reduced below the reasonable minimum of safety. He also emphasised the danger to the health of moving troops in the tropics, especially Red Sea, during hot weather. It was vitally important to maintain an adequate garrison in India and the British garrison was now being reduced to what was considered a fair sufficiency.

CONCEPTUAL

Uncertainty reduction theory

SOCIOLOGY

This refers to the idea that when people who are completely unknown to each other happen to meet, their primary concern initially is to reduce or overcome the state of uncertainty that exists between them. The initial interaction is generally limited by social rules and norms, but the interaction may later turn personal as the individuals share information about each other and plan on having future interactions. The uncertainty reduction theory was first proposed by American communication theorists Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese in their 1975 paper “Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond”.

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