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## HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL STEREOTYPES: EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF FEMALES OF HARYANA

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### Abstract:

Education of females has been considered as one of the crucial agencies for bringing social development, changes, empowerment and subsequently social mobility. Higher education has been accorded a major position in such transformations, as at this stage, learners get the opportunity to engage with critical texts and this may also help in developing critical outlook amongst them on social stereotypes. This paper probes upon such concerns and possibilities in details in the context of educated females of one of the states of India, i.e., Haryana. It engages with critical question like- does higher education influence the perspectives of females towards social stereotypes? If yes, what are the new frames of thought? The mixed method research design was used for the execution of the study. Questionnaire and focus group discussion were used as tools for the data collection process. After the analysis, it was observed that there are significant variations in the perspective of females towards social stereotypes, specifically in the context of caste and gender in the public sphere. But socialization, familial ties and social pressure have more influence in the personal sphere of females. So, there is a scope for more agentic interventions in this arena.

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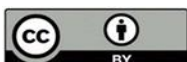
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### 1.0 Introduction:

Education acts as one of the major formal socializing agents, after family, through which persons comes to know about social realities in everyday affairs (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). It also facilitates the learner in understanding and conceptualizing their roles and positions in society. In this way, it helps in maintaining status quo in the society. But it is also one of the ways of bringing social changes, transformations, development, empowerment and subsequently social mobility. In today's scenario, education is not only considered a tool for gaining literacy and employment, rather it is also acknowledged as an active medium of providing agency amongst people to question the oppressions and differentiations persistent in the larger social context (Sharma, 2006; Parimala, 2009; Jabvala & Sharma, 2015). Further, higher education has been accorded a major position in bringing socio-economic and political upliftment in the life of persons because at this stage they may receive the opportunity to engage with critical texts and experiences. All these paves the way for their future opportunities (Rao, 2003; Rege, 2010; Parimala, 2017). Hence, one

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can infer that education plays a dual role i.e., of developing consensus among the society and of providing spaces for conflicts and contestations (Madan, 2013; Kohli, 2017).

But all sections of society do not get the opportunity to avail the education in their lives. The people who are in the lower rungs of the social hierarchy and especially, females are being usually sidelined in the process of providing education (Beauvoir, 1983; Chanana, 2001). This disparity become more severe in the case of higher education. This is true not only for India but for majority of nations worldwide (Gupta, 2010). The elimination of these disparities has been the top priority of various international organizations like United Nations Organization (UNO), United Nations Educational Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), World Bank (Dhar, 2014; David, 2016). These organizations have conducted various studies to analyze and address the issues of unequal distribution of educational opportunities among different groups of the society, especially among males and females. For instance, UNESCO published World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education, in which it has been shared that majority of the countries in the world faces gender disparities in terms of providing educational opportunities to its citizens. The report also focuses upon the issues faced by females in the field of education, some of them are as follows:

- *Constraints within family* - Females are burdened with the domestic responsibilities of rearing and caring for their family members. Also, the view of their families towards the education of women is unfavourable. They believe that educating girls of their family is a wastage of time and money as their ultimate work is to manage the household responsibilities.
- *Constraints within society* - Females face the pressure of early marriage. Furthermore, the fear of sexual harassment and violence also restricts their opportunities of moving out of their homes to avail education.
- *Biased Policies and educational practices* - The curriculum is usually gender discriminatory as well as the educational practices also reiterate the gender stereotypes prevalent in the society, which further marginalize the females in the educational institutions. (UNESCO, 2012)

These international organizations have also started different initiatives like Millennium Development Goals (started by United Nations) to develop the roadmap to address these constraints faced by females in their path of attaining education. The government of India has also implemented various positive discriminatory policies such as scholarships and reservation to increase the access of females in higher education institutions, since independence.

This has also resulted in a higher enrolment rate of females in the arenas of higher education as well. This is also evident in official statistics, for instance during the year 1950-51, only 43000 females were enrolled in Higher Education's courses (Source- Ministry of Education (MOE), whereas in the years 2018-19, 18189500 females were being enrolled in different courses of Higher Education (Government of India, 2019). This manifold increase is an evidence that more and more females are now getting the opportunity to pursue higher education.

But if we look at the statistics related to gender parity and equity, they provide a different side of the story. For instance, 15.8 million females were not able to take birth between the year 1990 to 2018 due to evil practices such as female foeticide and those who were able to survive continue to be vulnerable. A data reveals that 27.3% females of the country are becoming the victim of social evil of child marriage, 30% of females are facing physical violence in their lives and 6.3 females per lakh population faces rape (National Family Health Survey, 2016).

In view of this, it becomes important to question: Does education play any role in challenging the status quo or it just conforms to the same? Does it provide agency to females to question the gender stereotypes or it just strengthens it? In this paper, the researcher has tried to engage with these questions. The area of study selected was the two districts of Haryana, i.e., Jhajjar and Mahendragarh.

## 2.0 The Context:

Haryana is the second largest state in terms of economic development. It has a unique geographical positioning being situated near Delhi, the capital city of India. Interestingly, thirteen districts of the state out of a total of twenty-two districts are part of the National Capital Region. This close proximity of the state to the capital city, also affects the socio-economic milieu of the state due to close interaction between the people of both the areas. Many people of Haryana visit Delhi on a daily basis for the purpose of study or work. This spatial mobility of people to the urban space and their grounding in the rural setup have given rise to a unique polarized representation of the state as the one which is economically blooming but is facing severe issues in creating better and secured spaces for females (Chowdhry, 2007; Kohli, 2017).

The glimpse of these polar representations can also be seen in the statistics related to female's participation in the field of higher education and their social status within the state. For instance, the report of All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) (2019) shares that the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) amongst the females of Haryana is 32.4, which is much higher than the national average of only 26.3. This indicates that more females of the state are getting opportunity to pursue their higher education as compared to the national average. The nature and quality of education can be questioned but the statistics at least clarifies that more females of the students are engaged in the field of higher education by one way or the other.

But if one moves beyond this and try to explore the socio-cultural scenario of the state then the statistics are scary. For instance, the sex ratio of the state is 879 girls per 1000 boys, whereas at the national level it is 943 girls per 1000 boys (Census, 2011). Furthermore, the state has the gender parity index of only 0.88 which is way lower than the country's overall index of 0.98. Not only this, the cases of honour killing, female foeticide, violence against females are also high in the state of Haryana (Chowdhry, 2007; Chowdhry, 2012; Teltumbde, 2012; Singla, 2014). These contrasting data indicates that the paradoxes are existent in the society of Haryana. On the one hand, the females of the state are making their presence felt in the fields of higher education but on the other hand, their situation within the society is questionable as they are becoming victims of female foeticide and other kinds of violence.

In such a paradoxical scenario, it becomes crucial to question- Is this increase in access to higher education playing any role in the development of a more equitable society for females of Haryana? Are the females who are getting higher education becoming more critical about the social stereotypes or are they maintaining the status quo? The researcher tried to engage with these questions in two districts of the state, i.e., Jhajjar and Mahendragarh, which are at the two-extreme continuum of the development as Jhajjar is a highly developed district and have two special economic zones along with many other modern amenities, whereas Mahendragarh is at the lower rungs on the continuum of development and avail Backward Region Grant Fund from the Central Government. In the case of availability of higher education institutions also, both the districts have different status. For instance, Central University of Haryana is present in Mahendragarh and main reason of establishing it in that particular district was to provide more and more opportunities to the people of the district to avail higher education whereas, there are two private universities only

in the Jhajjar district to provide educational opportunities to the residents. These variations in both the districts provided the researcher with the multifaceted data about the females of different socio-cultural and economic groups in Haryana.

### **3.0 Execution of the Study:**

The research has been positioned in the interpretivist paradigm to comprehend the interrelationship between higher education and perspectives of females towards social stereotypes. This paradigm believes in multiplicity of reality and focuses on developing understanding through in-depth analysis of social events.

A mixed method research design has been applied for the execution of the study. At the outset, the researcher used a questionnaire to understand the perspective of females towards social stereotypes prevailing in the Indian society as a whole. The said questionnaire was developed in consultation with the members of *Fair Chance Project*, University of Warwick (United Kingdom). These questionnaires were distributed among females of both the districts of Haryana, i.e., Jhajjar and Mahendragarh. The females who participated in this study were selected through the process of snowball sampling. The educational qualification of the respondents ranged from graduation to doctorate. The questionnaire was also converted in the google form for the ease of few respondents who were not physically present in the districts but were permanent residents of the districts and were studying in different parts of the country. The large variety of samples consisting of graduate females to doctoral students and also the females studying outside the selected districts were purposefully selected so as to get varied viewpoints of the educated females. Finally, a total of 100 filled questionnaires were collected and analysed (50 from each district). Following this, 2 focus group discussions (one in each district) were conducted with some of the selected participants. These respondents were female residents of the selected districts and were pursuing varied higher education courses. The participation of the candidates was on a voluntary basis. The snowball sampling technique was used for approaching the willing participants in both the tools, i.e. questionnaire and focus group discussion. This was done to develop a deeper understanding of the influence of higher education in shaping their perspectives about social stereotypes. The whole study has been executed under the purview of feminist research methodology which provides space to subjective and multiple ideas as well as agency of females (Menon, 2012; Wickramasinghe, 2014).

### **4.0 Females in Higher Education and their Views about Social Stereotypes: Stagnation and Changes:**

The two major arenas where the stereotypical notions are highly evident are- caste-based inequalities and gender differences which are existent in the society. Varied questions were included in the questionnaire and focus group discussion to explore the perspectives of educated females on these two notions. No 'direct questions' like-what do you think about caste-based inequalities were asked from respondents. This was done to avoid '*politically correct answers*', which is usually a major issue faced by researchers in these kinds of researches which are based on finding the intricacies of social events. In order to reduce the chances of getting the '*socially acceptable answers*', such questions were included in the questionnaire as well as in focus group discussion which were related to their own life. This facilitated the author in attaining a realistic picture of the scenario. The major findings of these two arenas are shared below.

#### 4.1 Caste-based Stereotypes: Glimpses of Changes and Stagnation:

Many researchers have revealed that caste is a very significant social institution of Indian society which is based on the idea of ascribed statuses which are strengthened by the idea of purity and pollution. Further, the caste system is highly unequal and hierarchical in nature (Phule, 1873; Srinivas, 1962). In the study, the researcher tried to explore the perspective of the females about these caste-based inequalities. In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to share whether they have friends from other caste groups. 97% participants shared that they have friends who belong to different castes and they usually enjoy cordial relationships with them. This question was also asked in focus group discussion so as to triangulate the data. Majority of respondents voiced that they befriend people of other caste. They were also asked to tell the names of their close friends and peer groups. Majority of the respondents named people of other caste as well. This made it evident that caste-based lines are blurring in terms of interaction in the public sphere, especially in terms of educated females. This phenomenon is slowly visible in the society, because people of all castes, although their number may vary, are getting the opportunity to attend the higher education institutions, so the colleges or universities provides the space to the people of different castes to interact with each other, to some extent. These interactions are facilitating in somewhat reducing their caste-based stereotypical notions and this is true for the members of all caste groups.

Beside the caste-based experiences of females in higher education institutions, the researcher tried to understand the role of education in choosing their life partners and the place of caste in this process. In order to explore this, the respondents were asked to hierarchize the important factors which they will keep in mind while choosing their life-partners. 51% of females marked caste as a *very important* factor for choosing the groom and 46% marked it as *important*. Only 3% females considered it as *unimportant*. This shows that caste-based inequalities and hierarchies are still existent in the private arenas and have great influence over the process of decision-making in the context of marriage alliances. Further, when they were asked to share their views on whether they will go against the wishes of their parents while deciding their partners. 63% of respondents shared that they will not go against the wishes of their parents while 29% of the respondents were not sure of what they will do in such a case. Only 8% respondents shared that they will go against the wishes of their parents if they feel that the person which they like is virtuous. The social barriers are the main reasons for such responses as the society doesn't accept the inter-caste alliances very easily. These kinds of views were also shared by the participants during focus group discussion as well. Many respondents shared that inter-caste marriage alliances are not permitted in the society and females are still expected to be in accord with the social norms. They are also socialized to adhere to these norms. Various social apparatuses like stories, folklores, festivals and rituals are used as tools for these gendered socializations (Dube, 2001; Chowdhry, 2007). One of the respondents also validated the social norms in the words "*chhota aur baddi jati ke mel ka matlab howe se gadhe ne ghode pe bithana. Khana rehna thik se, but byah te kati manjoor ko ne*". (developing alliances between people of lower and upper castes is like making a donkey stand on a horse. Staying and eating together is fine but marriage between both of them is not acceptable). These types of examples show that family ties and socialization play a crucial role in promoting these notions of caste-based inequities in the mind of these educated females, due to which they are still not able to question these hierarchies in their everyday life. These processes of socialization start early in the life of females, as a result of which these caste based ideas remain deeply embedded in their identities and the education have a limited influence over bringing changes in these notions (Chakravarti, 2009).

From the above findings, it may be inferred that enhanced mobility and exposure to varied social spaces due to educational opportunities are leading to changes in the attitude of females. These are leading to reduction in social divisions and hierarchies which are prominent in the traditional Indian social lives. Other public spaces like educational institutions, markets, eateries etc., with the intervention of globalization, are also creating new forms of caste-neutral spaces to some extent where females can befriend people of other caste as well. Further, the younger generation, which is more aware about their 'worth', 'identity' and 'education' have a somewhat different attitude towards caste differences and are forming mixed caste and class groups. But they feel hesitant in accepting this idea in their private spaces, like marriage, because of fear of social boycott. This shows that primary socialization and family ties are still playing a crucial role in formulating the perspectives of females about these caste-based inequalities and hierarchies. They are questioning them in the public sphere to some extent as a result of higher education but there is a requirement to develop a critical outlook and empowerment in the private sphere as well.

#### ***4.2 Gender Roles: A Contested Terrain:***

Gender difference is one of the areas which needs critical stance while questioning social stereotypes. While major shifts in the attitude have been observed by the researcher in the said area of study, but these changes are paradoxical in their nature. On the one hand, females are expressing progressive outlook towards orthodox gender roles, but on the other hand chauvinistic attitude is evident in some spheres as well. For instance, in the questionnaire, females were asked to voice their views about the importance of marriage in the life of a female. In response to this question, 44% respondents marked it as 'important' and 23% respondents marked it as 'very important'. But it was interesting to observe that, 33% respondents marked it as 'not important'. From this data, it can be inferred that educated females are trying to question the popular notion that marriage is an integral part in their lives. Further, when they were asked to express their opinion that does education influence the marriage prospects of females? 74% of females responded positively. When asked to elaborate, few of them expressed that educated females have greater say in the decision making in marriage institutions as compared to others. They also shared that education gives them courage to share their views with confidence. Many respondents shared that though they are usually not allowed to choose their groom on their own but at least they have a say to reject a person in case he is not suitable. This question was also asked during focus group discussion to get an in-depth understanding about the above-mentioned issue. Many of the participants also shared that educated females can fight for their rights (if need be) in their husband's family. In fact, being educated they have a somewhat more respectable position in the family. However, another perspective was also enunciated. One of the participants shared that higher education sometimes restricts the marriage prospects of females also. Sometimes, families stop the education of females because they can't 'afford' to get a more qualified groom for their educated daughters. This shows that there is a popular gender biased notion prevalent in the society that males should be more qualified than females. Because he is the one who is going to control the family affairs in the future and if a female is more educated than him, it may lead to clashes in married life. This popular notion is a result of patriarchal male dominant world-view where females are usually positioned at the lower rungs of the society. As a result of these populist notions, the higher education opportunities of many females are getting impeded.

Further, the researcher wanted to explore the agency of females in the family institution. In order to explore the same, the respondents were asked to share whether they will ask for property from their parental family. Majority of respondents were of the view that they will not ask for a share in their parental property. Some of them reasoned that the society will not accept this and they

will lose their family ties. During focused group one of the respondents shared that- "*Bhai tee zameen lenge toh bhaat kun bharega. Teej tyohar biran ho jange*" (If we will take the land from brother then who will give gifts to us during the marriage of our children, our festivals will become colourless). This shows that females are aware about the legal rights given to them by the Indian constitution, but the social pressures and norms force them to leave their rights behind to maintain the status quo.

Further, the females were asked to share their agreement or disagreement over varied social norms and stereotypes. For instance, whether they agree with the statement that '*There are differences among males and females because of birth*'. In response to this, 43% respondents shared that they partially agree with the statement and 23% fully agreed with the aforesaid statement. Many of the females echoed that females are superior than men as they carry children. This notion is shared by society and females are socialized in accepting them. For instance, in many folklores, male is usually projected as 'seed' and female is projected as 'field', where the new life grows (Dube, 2001). This is a 'populist notion' which is also usually projected in the media, including print as well as electronic media, to promote the domestication of females. Due to the influence of gendered socialization and its reiteration in media, this gendered notion is unconditionally accepted by these educated females also. It became more evident in their response to the statement that, '*mother is the only caregiver for the child*'. In response to this, 44% respondents agreed partially and 9% respondents agreed fully with the statement. This shows that the gender roles and stereotypes are deeply ingrained in the psyche of the educated females as well through the process of socialization. Due to this, they readily accept the idea that rearing and caring is the sole responsibility of the female.

Further, the researcher also tried to explore the perspective of females about the idea of domestication of women in terms of household works. For this, the respondents were asked to share their views on the statement that '*all females should know household works*'. 45% respondents partially agreed to the statement and 29% of the respondents agreed fully. Further, they were asked that- '*working females should know how to balance between home and work*', to this 57% respondents agreed partially and 29% respondents agreed fully with the statement. On further query, females shared that, household responsibilities are prerogative of females and education can't help them in '*getting rid*' of them. One of the respondents shared that- "*padhe likhe ne bhi roti banani pade hai aur anpadha ne bhi. Sab yahi soche hain ki ladki ne padha bhi do, ghar ke kaam bhi sikha do. Ladka ne na sikhate. Ya soch badalan mein teme lagega. Tab tain te kaam sikhna bhi padega aur karna bhi padega.*" (Whether a female is educated or uneducated, both have to cook bread. Everybody thinks that, educate the female, make her learn the household chores too. We don't teach our boys to do the same. The changing of this mindset will take time. Till then, we will have to learn the work and do it). This shows that gendered socialization, family and social pressure force them to adhere to the popular gender roles of rearing and caring for the family and domestication. Majority of females are also getting critical about these notions but social control is hindering them in exercising their agency.

From the above findings, it becomes evident that females are questioning the institution of marriage in limited arenas but in a significant manner. They perceive higher education as a tool in attaining the agency for questioning this institution. But majority of respondents believe that sometimes this education also affects their chances of moving further on the ladders of higher education because of the notion of male superiority. Further, they are also aware about their constitutional rights (for example property rights). But they do not exercise those rights in absolute terms. The social pressure, whose roots can be found in the process of socialization and family

relationship restricts them from doing so. They are also somewhat aware about gender stereotypes in terms of role divisions existent in the family as well as society, but they try to maintain status quo under the pressure of family and society. This awareness about their rights is one step forward in attaining social mobility and will surely convert into agentic decisions in the near future.

### 5.0 Concluding Remarks:

The perspectives of females of Haryana with regard to social stereotypes are paradoxical in nature. On the one hand, there are findings that they are critical about the caste and gender-based stereotypes prevailing in the society. Contrary to this, there has been cases where educated females have challenged the caste-based hierarchies in public spheres which could be due to the development of caste-neutral spaces like universities, markets etc. that provides avenues for the interaction of people of different strata, castes and gender. Breaking the stereotype, the females have started to question the notion of marriage and gender-based inequalities. The university education and globalisation along with the advent of modern communication spaces and social media are playing an important role in bringing these changes in the perspective of females. Higher education is enabling them in developing critical outlook about caste based inequalities and gender stereotypes to certain extent.

But, in some spheres, specifically in the personal or private domain, the familial ties and social pressures are significantly affecting their decision-making power. The socialization process supported by rituals, folktales, folklore etc. further consolidates these stereotypes due to which these females are forced to adhere to the popular notions pertaining to caste and gender inequalities. In other words, they are forced to maintain the status quo as a result of social pressures and norms. However, it does not necessarily mean that they are not well aware of these inequalities. Hence, we can conclude that higher education is empowering females to question the social stereotypes to certain extent, but still the family and society are playing a crucial role in guiding as well as restricting their perspective as well as agency as education has not yet completely penetrated the institution of familial and social dominance. So, one can infer that there is a long way forward for females to develop critical outlook about social stereotypes in all walks of life, including public and private sphere.

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