

Book Review

Girls' Schooling Women's Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia by Roger Jeffery and Alka M. Basu, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1996.

MASS education is one of the basic elements in human resource development of any country, especially so for developing countries such as India. It is viewed not only as an output in its own right but also as an input for economic growth. A whole range of economic and social processes accord education the status of a catalytic agent, for example, in augmenting personal incomes, in broadening markets for modern day goods and services, in effecting behavioral changes reducing mortality and fertility and so on. The mechanisms at work generally operate through improving the cognitive process of individuals which enhances individual's capacity in decision making and to identify the portfolio of choices available. Education's direct economic reward emerges from a decline in informational costs which often is so huge such as in case of extension programmes in vital sectors such as, agricultural, health and contraception and consumer education. Collectively, these individual gains would alter the mind set of an entire generation. Education does enhance human capabilities and empower the oppressed. Thus pedagogy is one of the essential objectives of all civil societies. The book in review attempts to establish associations between girls' schooling, female autonomy and fertility change. The basic thesis of this book is whether the modern secular education is providing opportunities to women, who are hitherto considered to be suppressed and exploited by the cultural mores and rules of patriarchy which is so dominant in India. The discussion in this book is women's education as opposed to girls' schooling as is given to understand from the title of the book. The debate, however, has not been placed in a comparative or relative perspective to the contributions and role of male education or schooling which is also important, in fact the absence of this perspective in this monograph, therefore, presents only half the story. The debate extends further to explore the relationship between, education or schooling, leading to changes in female autonomy and fertility behaviour, which often is measured empirically in terms of fertility indices and contraception. This volume brings together seminar papers discussed in 1993 and a few invited articles. There are 12 Chapters covering countries in South Asia yet the focus is on Indian federation.

The articles have a wide variation in terms of approach addressing the issue - ranging from conceptual, in-depth village studies, case studies, survey data analysis as well as inter-country level empirical comparisons.

Two papers, one by Alaka Basu and the other by John Cleland and Jejeebhoy, set a debate and present review of aggregate picture in terms of the relationships between female literacy and fertility respectively. Other papers are mostly case studies and contextual based, such as inter-generational study of Punjabi women, micro study of village Bijnore by Patricia and Roger Jeffery. One will also find a useful analysis on regional variations in fertility by Leela Visaria and a case study of the state of Kerala.

A noteworthy contribution emerges from John Cleland and Jejeebhoy's empirical cross country analysis of the relationship between fertility and education in different parts of the world. The approach and evidence in this paper reminds the important contributions made by Cleland since late 1980s in understanding associations between mother's education and child survival (see for example, Cleland and van Ginneken, 1989).

Without going into the rhetoric of defining concepts and giving meanings to words such as status and autonomy, this paper summarizes the findings from micro-individual level cross-sectional analysis for many South Asian countries. The findings which stand out are: (a) that education operates through a number of other parameters such as age at marriage, contraception, desired number of children and so on; and (b) that the relationship varies according to different levels of mother's education. What would be the impact of contextual factor, such as the overall environment of literacy on this association is not clear. For example, the level of female education and fertility relationship may be different in societies with relative low level of aggregate literacy compared with those with higher level of literacy. Besides, a number of cultural factors intervene in determining these relationships which need to be identified. While the factor that intensity of service availability has been identified to be an important determinant, the technical efficiency gains of female education and informational variables have not been adequately discussed in this paper. The informational variables seem to be the dominant ingredients shaping the cognitive and behavioural parameters of a set of population in association with formal literacy.

Alka Basu's conceptual paper makes an interesting reading. Albeit, not adequately referred to, she borrows extensively from the works of John C. Caldwell and Amartya Sen. However, establishing definitional differences between status and autonomy is easier said than done. The delineation of definitions often demand a considerable rigour of empirical analysis which is not found in this paper. It also requires strong empirical support to conceptually differentiate the parameters for schooling, education and literacy. If Basu's paper is aimed at setting a framework of analysis for the subsequent papers then one would not find her arguments having been tested for or even debated upon in the papers which follow.

Research reported by Karuna Chanana; Jeffery and Jeffery; and Carol Vlassoff are in the tradition of social anthropologists. These are welcome contributions since qualitative studies on the social dynamics are rare and far in-between. Chanana narrates the dynamics of behavioural linkage and change between two generations of Punjabi women living in New Delhi. This paper successfully draws attention to the fact that at given the cultural context the associations between education and fertility is not as straightforward as one generally believes.

Patricia and Roger Jeffery discuss the dynamics amongst the Jats and Muslims living in a village in Uttar Pradesh. They present interesting discussion around the role of schooling in the choice of marriage partners given specific rules of kinship and family formation in western Uttar Pradesh. They conclude that girls schooling in the study area did not make a difference given strong hold of patriarchy. The impact of schooling and education may indeed be a medium to long term phenomena. Besides the positive effects of schooling will be apparent and visible when the target group as a whole has achieved a threshold level literacy. The evidence now available from a number of empirical analysis of large scale micro-economic data suggest that internal or non-market rate of returns to schooling have been significant; such as in improving primary health care utilisation, immunization rates, and standardized child anthropometric measures and so on (see for example, Shariff, 1988).

Carol Vlassoff's presentation of change between 1975 and 1987 ends with an optimistic note. She revisits a village in Maharashtra after twelve years and compares the attitudes relating to decision-making, autonomy and fertility among the adolescents aged 13-18 and married women aged 15-26. She notices positive changes in the lives of women in this rural area, more so in the reduction of drudgery and increase in leisure time. She, however, remains short of making conclusive statements with respect to improvements in female autonomy due to schooling, which has increased both in terms of proportion and duration, measured as mean years of schooling. Vlassoff while recognizing the important role individual level factors play, attribute changes as expected, give the past socio-economic transformations in earlier decades, which she avoids labelling to process of modernization. An interesting reading in this chapter would have been, explaining the attitudinal differentials between the two cohort of women during two time periods considering factors such as village exogamy practices in choice of marriage partners. If this village practices village exogamy then married women would have come from a number of other surrounding areas and therefore their attitudes are likely to reflect the social environment of respective place of residence before marriage; as opposed to the influences of the village in focus which would have the relevance to adolescents who are not yet married but ready to migrate out after marriage.

Two chapters are devoted to the presentations of empirical data exploring autonomy and fertility/contraception relationships, one by Leela Visaria and the other by Irudaya Rajan et. al. One common factor in both the papers is the discussion relating to Kerala using the same data set, albeit Visaria's paper compares Kerala with Gujarat. Although Leela Visaria expressed surprise over the lack of clear-cut contrast in female autonomy between Gujarat and Kerala, she finds relative better income autonomy among the tribes of Gujarat. This may be due to the peculiarities of economic sustenance and the family system among the tribes which demand even women to fend for self and family. Given this scenario how far the financial independence of the tribal women can be viewed as financial autonomy is debatable. Overall, however, this analysis did not find any discernable association between autonomy and fertility behaviour and contraception. Irudaya Rajan's paper besides presenting a number of indicators of autonomy also cross-classify information along with husband's education. This paper recognized role of education in decline in fertility in Kerala primarily operating through a reduction in gender differentials in literacy. There are two chapters on Bangladesh, one by Cleland et. al., and the other by Sajeda Amin, another paper by Zeba Sathar who explores the data from Pakistan and Bruce Caldwell does it for Sri Lanka.

Over all this is an important book largely because it draws our attention to the fact that education per se need not be considered panacea for all ills specially in speeding up the decline in fertility in developing countries. However, in doing so it should be remembered that education is important in its own right for achieving a number of other non-demographic goals as well. One argument which should have been emphasised at least as a separate chapter in this book is to demonstrate that level of education does matter even for achieving demographic goals. If the reader gets a feeling that girls education, female autonomy and fertility linkages are not conclusively established it only means that empirical association is difficult to present. It only goes to prove that there is a need to explore further new data using alternative analytical methodologies largely controlling for a number of independent and confounding effects of endogenous factors so plagued in behavioural research.

References

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