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India, Factor 16: Education

India: Women's Education

With an estimated population of 1.2 billion, India is home to about 17% of the world population (World Bank). It is the seventh largest country by size and the second largest by population in the world (World Bank). From the far northern regions near Pakistan and Tibet to the southern tip jutting out into the Indian Ocean, India has a total land area of 2,973,190 square kilometers or 1,147,955 square miles (World Bank). The country also has a dense population: 954 people per square mile. Almost a third of all Indian citizens live on less than \$1.25 a day according to World Food Programme.

Indian society

It is difficult to define a typical Indian family without first describing how a majority of the Indian society works. For centuries, society in India consisted of a system of social rankings, called the caste system. The caste system originated from the Hindu beliefs concerning humans and reincarnation. According to Hinduism, people were reborn from different body parts of the god Brahma. The Aryans, who settled in India around 1500 AD, used this belief to their advantage. They developed the caste system based on race and birth. The *Brahmins* were the priests and teachers. They were said to have reincarnated from Brahma's head and were at the top of the social ladder. Below them, the rulers and soldiers made up the *Kshatriyas* caste. The *Vaisyas* were the merchants and traders and the *Sudras* were the laborers and servants. At the very bottom, considered outside of the caste system, were the Untouchables or Dalits. There was no moving in the caste system; the caste you were born into was the caste you stayed in for your entire life. Even though the caste system was outlawed in the 1950's, children in rural areas are still being taught to respect the caste above them and detest the one below (The Caste System). Because of the ancient beliefs, a massive gap exists between the rich and the poor in India.

The Dalits are among the poorest in the entire world. They are considered to be worth less than dogs and, as the name implies, untouchable. Dalits make up about 20% of India's population, but suffer the most economically. The Untouchables were not allowed to enter public buildings, marry outside of their caste, or get a high-paying job. Today, about 70% of Dalits live beneath the poverty line and live in the slums and streets of India. Only 3% of Dalit women can read or write, trapping them in an endless cycle of poverty (Yohannan, K. P.).

For a typical Dalit woman, having a baby would be both a blessing and a new burden. It would mean another one to help out the family and earn money, yet it would also mean another mouth to feed. Boys are highly preferred over girls. Because of this, in India there are 11 million abortions each year and there are 37 million more men than women according to GFA. If a woman has two daughters in a row she can be considered cursed and sometimes even divorced because of the disgrace she brings to her husband's family. The women will be left to her own resources and the man will take another wife. In a documentary produced by GFA (Veil of Tears), it was found that, on average, women are married at 17 and sixty percent of Indian girls are married before the Indian legal age of 18.

Typically, the man of the house goes out to work, sometimes far away in a big city, depending on the area he lives in. The woman takes care of the children and home. An article from *The Times of India* reports the last census revealed a decline in family and household sizes. Now over half of Indian homes in urban areas have only four family members. However, the census also found there are still a significant number of families with five, six, or even up to nine members in rural areas. Interestingly, many of the devout Hindu Indian upper-class are vegetarians. So Dalits commonly eat chapati, an unleavened flatbread. Periodically, they also enjoy beef and pork with their meals. Most of the wealthy families can send their children to prestigious schools for a high-quality education. The families beneath the poverty line need their children to earn money so children are expected to work from a very young age and do not receive a formal education. According to the Indian Human Development Survey, an average Dalit family will earn between 20,000 and 22,800 rupees annually (313-358 USD).

Women's Education for Health and Hygiene

There is a direct connection between the health of a child and the education of the mother. It is estimated that 70% of babies born in India are delivered at home without a medical professional. Without ever being taught anything different, parents can unknowingly hurt their own children. For example, because the cow is considered holy, once the baby's umbilical cord is cut, people will actually put fresh cow dung on the cord (GFA). Another practice that can be harmful is women not breastfeeding. A mother's milk contains colostrum, which is essential to the baby's first few days. Colostrum provides all the nutrients the baby needs at the time, as well as builds up his/her immune system. However, because of strange suspicion surrounding it, many mothers will not breastfeed. This lack of colostrum leaves the newborn exposed to disease and susceptible to malnutrition from their very first week of life (GFA). If mothers would be taught how to best take care of their babies healthy, it would give the next generation a better start.

Hygiene in small villages and remote areas is often neglected because of lack of resources and lack of education. Access to adequate health care is very limited. A village will use the same river to wash their livestock, clean their clothes, and bathe themselves. It is estimated that 30% of skin problems in India could be avoided by simply taking a bath properly with soap (GFA). It seems like such a simple solution that would affect thousands of people. In reality, a bath with soap and clean water would be a luxury to many Indian inhabitants. Safe and clean water is almost impossible to get in the remote regions of India. The river mentioned earlier, that the village used to clean their animals, will also double as the source of their drinking water. This leads directly to many water-borne diseases such as diarrhea and cholera. Because hand-washing is not taught to children, they consume harmful pathogens, which leads to digestive problems and often intestinal worms (GFA). Many organizations dig wells for villages and a well has the potential to change a community. However, along with a supply of clean water, hygiene needs to be taught. Children need to be educated on how to keep themselves clean and healthy. When people are taught how to take care of themselves properly, their likelihood of contracting disease drops, while their health improves.

Education for Jobs and Agriculture

Gambling and drinking is common at Indian men's social gatherings. This has become a prevailing problem for the poor woman of India. If a woman has a drunkard husband or if her husband dies, she will have to fend for herself or her children. Women will work all day, but without education or a

skill, their work will not pay much. A family cannot get adequate nutrition from a job paying Indian minimum wage. A girl who lives in India and has seen this poverty first-hand put it best when she said, "Less education leads to less jobs, which leads to more below the poverty line, which leads to more hunger.(Thadani, B)" Yet these mothers with no formal education still have to put food on the table so they find other ways. Because there are so few options, some women prostitute themselves or their daughters. This has led to a rise in the spread of AIDS (GFA). Other mothers will even make the extreme decision to sell their children. Many times the thinking behind this is "if a person has enough money to buy my child, they will have enough money to provide for my child." A family can be torn apart because of lack of education and job opportunities.

In big cities, such as Mumbai and New Delhi, there are multiple options for jobs. But in the rural areas, where 80% of the Indian population lives, there are considerably less available jobs. Over 50% of Indians work in agriculture, making it the largest source of livelihood in the whole country (National Portal of India). Some grow only enough food to support their families, some send their extra produce to market, other Indians work and harvest for a landowner. Though it depends on the region, common crops include: rice, wheat, legumes, tea, and cotton (Agriculture in India).

As it is in multiple developing areas around the world, many regions in India that do not have adequate infrastructure to support agriculture. Without roads or means to get their crops to market, some farmers face the very serious problem of their year's work spoiling after the harvest. This limits the amount and variety of food available at markets. Because of middlemen, inefficiency, and waste, a farmer in India will receive 10-23% profit. A farmer in the United States or Europe will usually keep 64-81% of the profit for the same product (Agriculture in India). Irrigation and flood protection are also insufficient in many districts.

However, productivity levels are another important factor in the agricultural problems facing India. The country ranks considerable low in productivity compared to countries such as China, Brazil, the United States, and other nations. Annually, a field in China can produce twice as much as a field in India of the same size (Agriculture in India). This problem can be linked to several causes. Again, irrigation is lacking, but another big problem is the ignorance and difficulty of modern farming methods and technology. Most small farms still use impractical tools to plant and harvest. Genetically-bred seeds and fertilizer, which are common and successful in countries all around the globe, are not widely used in India. Tractors and modern technology are used in large farms. However, machinery such as tractors are illogical and almost unattainable for small farmers. Typically, their fields are so small, everything is done either by hand or by animals.

Correcting agricultural issues should be a top priority of the Indian government. Farmers need to be educated and equipped; infrastructure problems need to be addressed. India is near the top of the charts for malnourished children. The country may actually have the most underweight children on the face of the planet according to a World Bank report. Yet, some researchers believe that if Indian agriculture improved to the level equal of developed countries, India could completely eliminate hunger within its borders (World Bank).

Obstacles to Women's Education

For a girl of low caste and no education, there are few options. She will grow up in poverty, have children in poverty, and the cycle will continue. Education breaks this cycle. Poverty alleviation is not people living off donations or dependent on other's charity to survive. Though donations take away food pains, it is not freedom. It places the poor at the mercy of how generous the rest of the world feels. Real poverty alleviation is achieved when a person can do productive work that sustains the individual and contributes to society. Non-profits can donate meals upon meals, but it will only have a short-term effect. Charity is a very noble act, but education is the key to long-term, positive change.

The need for women's education in India is evident. On paper, it seems so simple. However in reality, there are many obstacles to bringing education to the woman of India. As mentioned earlier, there are many high quality schools in the country, but affordable schools are in short supply. Often the girls of a poor family need to go out and work. Their income is vital to the family if one or both parents were unable to work. Even if a child doesn't need to hold a job, the price of school supplies can easily deter a family from sending their child to school. Education isn't always prioritized, especially for females. Hard-earned money needs to be spent on food and shelter, not "wasted" on pencils, paper, and backpacks.

In many places, access to a school is very limited. Sending a girl a long distance each morning is difficult and dangerous for the child. Providing transportation is an important factor of bringing education to a remote area. Once a school has been established in a community, it needs teachers, supplies, and a curriculum. The Ministry of Human Development (MHD) and the Ministry of Education (ME) are in charge of setting standards and training teachers (National Portal of India). Obviously, the MHD and the ME have challenges to overcome to make nationwide education available and affordable, but their role is important. The statistics are clear- education improves the general quality of life for citizens.

Solutions

When children had to worry about where their next meal would come from and couldn't go to school, some public schools in India began offering free lunches to students. Now parents wouldn't have to worry how they would feed their child that day. This was definitely a step in the right direction and educational opportunities are improving. India needs problem-solvers to look at educational issues from different perspectives and find new creative solutions to multidimensional problems.

As mentioned before, many adults struggle obtaining jobs because they lack marketable skills. This problem is especially prevalent to women in India. Many times a man's need for education will be put first, while the woman's is disregarded. To amend this problem, schools could offer adult classes as well as children's classes. These classes could help parents who never received the chance to go to school as a child. Instead of only the children learning and improving, the whole family could improve together to make a better life.

One class that would greatly benefit Indian women is math. In developed areas of the world, basic math is taken for granted. Although trigonometry and advanced calculus may not be essential to the average mothers, they do use some form of math everyday. Shopping, planning a budget, and working are excruciatingly difficult if a woman's math skills do not exceed addition and subtraction. Whether it is figuring out which quantity is a better buy or calculating how many seeds can be planted in an allotted space, basic math is crucial to everyone's life and should be offered to rural communities.

Agriculture classes would also be a practical option for adult classes. As climates, crops, and cultivation vary across India, topics would vary accordingly. Classes could teach irrigation methods, proper food storage, animal care, aquaculture, soil sciences, horticulture, seed genetics, fertilizer use, natural resources and so much more. Ag classes are a rather broad subject which is precisely why it

would serve the people of India so well. For example, the northeast section of India's dominant crop is wheat. But the country's southern tip is filled with forests and scrub (Agriculture in India). The farmer in the northeast needs cultivation, irrigation, soil sciences as they relate to wheat so he/she can grow better wheat. Whereas in the southern portion of the country, these classes might be useless. Instead forestry and natural resources may benefit farmers in that region. Armed with knowledge, Indian women could grow food for their families, as well as earn additional income. This is why the states of India should be responsible for supplying their local area with ag curriculum and teaching. Agriculture classes tailored to the needs of a region would lead to better production and a better environment in India.

Currently, in the remote rural areas of India, life skills are passed down from grandparents to parents to children. However, important skills such as reading and writing are rare among India's poorest and are not passed down. As mentioned before, only 3% of Dalit women can read and write (Yohannan, K. P.). This places them in a severely disadvantaged position, limiting their job options and quality. Because assuring that the citizens of India can read and write is a foundational and extremely daunting task, these classes should be taken care of by the national government.

For most Indian women, family care education would be beneficial. Basic child care and hygiene is lacking which can lead to huge health problems and the onsets of preventable diseases. With outside expertise and specialized resources, private organizations would be able to do training, present workshops, and create schools for family care education. NGOs (Non-government Organizations) can also have access to funds designated to philanthropy. For example, the Red Cross already does first aid training all around the world. They already have curriculum and certified trainers (International Committee of the Red Cross), they only need to implement them in rural India.

As stated before, Indian women are typically responsible for taking care of the home and children. Due to women taking care of the children, adult women cannot pursue education. Young children cannot and should not be left alone while the women attend classes; therefore, one solution could be that the government could do is provide childcare during class times. This would be beneficial in three areas. First and foremost, the women would be able to attend school and gain vital life skills to greatly improve their lives and fight food insecurity. Secondly, the children would be in a safe environment where they could be taught the basics of hygiene to lessen disease and improve overall health of the children. Third, the need for childcare workers would lead to jobs for Indian women which would provide an income and less dependence on aid- the definition of poverty alleviation. As the community begins to realize the value and importance of education, putting girls in school would become a priority instead of a struggle.

Upscaling India's education system cannot happen without the cooperation of the national government, communities, and private organizations. As India progresses in the 21st century, women's education needs to be prioritized by all three.

Adequate education gives Indian women the opportunity to hold a respectable job and provide better for their families. Education can change a whole generation. Educated farmers produce healthier crops, which benefits the community by stocking the markets with safe food. Educated workers help business thrive. As business and agriculture improve, a country's economy improves. Nelson Mandela summed it up best when he said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

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