

Original Article

Welfare Policy as a Political Frame: State Planning for Indian Women, 1951-74

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Received: 09 October 2022

Revised: 18 November 2022

Accepted: 02 December 2022

Published: 15 December 2022

Abstract - Narratives of time and issues concerning Indian women lay emphasis on the productive 19th century, with its fervent over social reform and women's position in Indian society, and the rather stormy decade of the 1970s that witnessed the publication of the Towards Equality report in 1974, which was prepared by the Government of India appointed committee called the committee on the Status of Women in India. This is followed by the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare declaring 1975 as the International Women's Year, the emergence of autonomous women's movements in India and the establishment of women-studies centres in Indian universities and the institutes of higher education. With its focus on the in-between period, that is, from 1951 to 1974, the article argues that the post-independence Indian state's planning and development processes incorporated women through the frame of welfare politics in which they were regarded primarily as mothers serving the household and the community through voluntary and largely unpaid labour.

Keywords - Five-year plans, India, Planning and Development, Public policy, Status of women.

1. Introduction

India is a liberal and secular constitutional democracy. Among the fundamental rights that the Indian Constitution guarantees to its citizens are the rights of equality before the law (Article 14), non-discrimination on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15), and the right to life and personal liberty (Article 21). Article 15 also stipulates that special provisions may be made for women and children or any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens; this exception has been provided for classes of people who are recognised as needing special protection. Indian Feminist scholars have contended that the subservience of women, therefore, became matters arising out of 'social disabilities arising out of a situation of backwardness and weakness and not as a wider issue of deprivation and oppression as entrenched in the social, economic and political structures of society and polity' (Arya, 2008 p. 56). Scholars have pointed out that although the 19th and early 20th centuries were marked by fervent over social reforms and that of women's productive capabilities in a newly emerging state, these questions lost traction in the first few decades of the post-independence Indian state (Arya, 2000; Banerjee 1998; Bhardwaj, Sen and Sreenivas 2021; Chaudhuri 1995; Kasturi, 1995; Menon 2022). Subsumed within the logic of nation-building, Indian women emerge as recipients of the state's protection, primarily in the areas of health, education, and welfare.

This article will delineate how it accommodated women in the planning and development the process by focusing on the post-independence Indian state's first Five Year Plans through the frame of welfare politics in which they were, nonetheless, regarded primarily as mothers are serving the household and the community. The principal aim of this article is to examine specific gender

implications arising from such an understanding and approach towards women. The article concludes with an analysis of criticism levelled against the welfarist system of the Indian state towards its women citizens by the Committee on Status of Women in India (CSWI) that released the 'Towards Equality' Report in 1974. The CSWI Report was the first comprehensive document that attempted a detailed study of the condition of women in India and articulated concerns about them.

2. Materials and Methods

This article relies on primary material published by the Planning Commission of India, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Ministry of Education, Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the Indian National Congress. The arguments made from the primary material are supported by secondary material from books and journal articles.

3. First Five-Year Plan, 1951-56

The First Five Year Plan of the post-independent Indian State laid out the multifarious and wide-ranging policies it was to implement on its path towards nation-building. The development strategy focused on democratic planning and involved a massive investment of financial and physical resources (Chakravarty 1987). The defining target of the state was to achieve a level of economic growth that would make India self-sufficient in food, a strong industrial base in the public sector, critical infrastructure, and the generation of employment opportunities. These growth processes and indicators, it was hoped, would substantially improve the quality of life of people. Further, it was realised that the state would also have to invest in achieving social goals and be responsible towards pursuing social justice, especially for those who were rather distant from its reach. The state took upon itself the responsibility to protect those who could not immediately benefit from



growth processes. In other words, the planning process had to be geared towards securing welfare, protection and rehabilitation for some sections of the population identified as needing such measures. Hence, social welfare planning and administration and a simultaneous impetus for economic growth were the objectives of the planning process. [15].

The first plan is instructive in how social welfare is defined both in terms of ensuring social justice and tackling political economy concerns. It envisages women as one of the primary people who need social welfare. It can be seen from how their place is squarely within familial responsibilities and community building. The principal social welfare problems, the plan emphasises, relate to women, children, youth, the family, underprivileged groups and social vice. The social health of any community will depend a great deal upon the status, functions and responsibilities of the woman in the family and the community. Social conditions should give to the woman opportunities for creative self-expression so that she can make her full contribution towards the economic and social life of the community... Some problems of women have to be dealt through social legislation, but other problems pertaining to health, social education, vocational training, increased participation in social and cultural life, provision of shelter, and assistance to the handicapped or maladjusted call for programmes at the community level. As women have to fulfil heavy domestic and economic responsibilities, adequate attention has to be paid to the need for relaxation and recreation both in the homes as well as in the community. The welfare agencies have catered to some extent to the needs of the widow and the destitute woman, but the quality of the service rendered by them and the nature of their work needs to be surveyed. [15, Chapter 36: Social Welfare, paragraphs 5, 29, 30, 67-69].

What is interesting in this articulation of social welfare is the assumption that while the state would drive capitalist development through planning (Chatterjee, 1998), it is the private and voluntary organisations that were being relied upon to carry to operationalise social welfare. The plan contends, A major responsibility for organising activities in different fields of social welfare, like the welfare of women and children, social education, community organisation, etc., falls naturally on private voluntary agencies. These private agencies have for long been working in their own humble way and without adequate State aid for the achievement of their objectives with their own leadership, organisation and resources. Any plan for the social and economic regeneration of the country should take into account the service rendered by these private agencies, and the state should give them the maximum cooperation in strengthening their efforts. Public cooperation, through these voluntary social service organisations, is capable of yielding valuable results in canalising (*sic*) private efforts for the promotion of social welfare. [15, *ibid.*, paragraph 17].

Working in binaries, then, of virtuous women (married and contributing to the political economy through reproduction) and 'maladjusted' women in prostitution or 'psychologically maladjusted in terms of her sexual and material desire, or when her economic activities do not permit a normal family life' the plan hoped for alleviation through local self-governing bodies, private agencies and vigilance associations.[15, *ibid.*, paragraphs 31, 32].

Maternity and Child Health (MCH) care receives paramount importance in the area of health. The plan does not address the general condition of women's health in the country. In other words, the state's social services for women's health did not go beyond the expectant mother's health. The plan affirmed that 'the protection of the expectant mother's health and her child is of the utmost importance for building a sound and healthy nation.' [15, Chapter 32: Health, paragraph 62]. With high maternal mortality and morbidity rates, the plan concedes that the growth in maternity and child health had thus far been driven by voluntary efforts and the same needed to be prioritised by both the government and the local authorities. [15, *ibid.*, paragraph 69]. In the first plan, we see an articulation between women's education and the impact that this is likely to have on the family's overall health. [15, *ibid.*]. With an emphasis on population control from the first plan itself, the aspiration was to educate women about family planning as well. [15, *ibid.*, paragraph 105; Sreenivas 2021].

In the chapter on education, the plan emphasises the role of education in the planned development of the new nation. It stressed that in a 'democratic setup, the role of education becomes crucial since it can function effectively only if there is an intelligent participation of masses in the affairs of the country'. [15, Chapter 33: Education, paragraph 1]. While assessing the levels of education in the country, the plan also indicated that women's education had faced neglect. The specific section on women's education points out that while 'the general purpose and objective of women's education cannot be different from the purpose and objective of men's education, there are vital differences in how this purpose has to be realised'. [15, *ibid.*, paragraphs 102-103]. The difference that is stressed is the sphere of life in which women apparently have a distinctive role and in which they make a special contribution, i.e., management of the household, child-rearing, social service, nursing and midwifery, teaching, especially in elementary schools, crafts like knitting and embroidery. [15, *ibid.*]. What were and continue to be enduring concerns about girls and young women's education in the country, the plan acknowledges the need for emphasis on primary education, but with decreased development expenditure on primary education, which fell from 67.7% in 1950-51 to 57.6% during the first Plan period. The plan is replete with anxiety about educating women and raising consciousness, through social education, about the need for educating women. [15, *ibid.*, paragraphs 105-107]. A policy response that the plan indicates is the formation of separate women's welfare

departments across states to assess resource requirements to address impediments to women's education. The aspiration for women's education exists simultaneously with their social education, which would 'women should learn everything which will enable them to discharge those functions which legitimately belong to their special sphere of life since a large majority of them will become mothers and have to bring up their children and manage their household economically and efficiently.' [15, *ibid.*, paragraph 110]. In this period, the launching of the Community Development Programme (CDP) in 1952 and the setting up of the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) in 1953 were the most significant institutional development programmes. CSWB aims to stimulate voluntary effort in women and child welfare, and the CDP aims at a decentralised development and social change in rural areas through community participation, cooperation and leadership (see, Sherman, 2021).

The First Plan of the post-independence Indian State recognised women as a special category of persons for whom special policies and measures would have to be enacted. However, the document failed to display any clear theoretical understanding of inequality arising out of gender oppression. The plan's focus was not on intervention in societal norms and correcting imbalances so that women could be equal citizens. Instead, the idea was largely to enable women to discharge their housewifely and procreative duties better.

4. Second Five-Year Plan, 1956-61

The Second Plan aimed to carry forward the goals outlined in the First Plan, i.e., increase in production, investment and employment. The main programme was to move towards a 'socialist pattern of society' that meant a 'better intellectual and cultural life' and thinking nation-building in a way where 'benefits of economic development must accrue more and more to the relatively less privileged classes of society, and there should be. Progressive reduction of the concentration of incomes, wealth an economic power'. [16].

For women, the goals and priority areas remain in the First Plan: education, health and social welfare services. In the chapter on education, the planners upheld the goal of girls' education to be of utmost importance. Wastage, that is, 'dropping out before completing four years at school, which is regarded as the minimum period for providing permanent literacy' and stagnation, when a 'pupil continues in the same class for more than the normal period' were more likely to affect the trajectory of girls' schooling, the plan emphasised and to address these problems, the plan proposed that busier agricultural seasons coincide with school holidays in the rural areas so that children who dropped out because they needed to contribute to family income could be retained in schools. [16, Chapter 23: Education, paragraphs 7-8]. An acknowledgement of the problems with regard to girls' education is done with the need to educate parents and make education 'closely related to the needs of girls'. [16, *ibid.*, paragraph 9]. This

dual recognition—of problems in girls' education and catering education to their needs, that is, feminising education—is sought to be addressed through recruiting more women teachers in primary and secondary schools, housing teachers in the villages, offering part-time employment to married women to bring them in the teaching professions, using locally available spaces for schooling where infrastructure is inadequate and organising local community effort. Work for women itself was imagined along what was understood to be feminine work—*gram sevikas* (village workers), nurses, health visitors, and teachers, to name a few. [16, *ibid.*, paragraph 24].

The second Five Year Plan is an important marker for setting up targets for women's education. In this plan period, the first National Committee on Women's Education was also set up on the recommendation of the Education Panel of the Planning Commission in 1957. [7]. Known as the Durgabai Deshmukh Committee, the committee examined what it called the basic approaches and fundamental considerations to the problem of women's education. [7, p. 6]. What is insightful about this Committee Report is its position that education is the birthright of every individual, whether a man or woman. It is alive to the recognising that 'neither duties of motherhood nor in the interest of preserving moral standards should it be really necessary to confine a woman to home'. [7, p. 8]. The report does not move towards imagining a non-conjugal life for women but enjoins refiguring the domestic space as one in which men participate in the division of labour. In an interesting articulation, the report contends that precisely for the 'better discharge of the duties and responsibilities of motherhood, the woman's role should not lie only or even primarily within the home. She must come out into the wider world and share its responsibilities. That would equip her to become a good mother as well.' [7, p. 8].

With its findings collated and released within the Second plan period, what is rather astonishing is the critique it mounts at both the First and the Second five-year plans. The data analysis from 1949-50 to 1956-57 shows an overall increase. Still, concerning girls' education, the number of institutions, enrolments, and appointments of women teachers at different stages has lagged behind that of men's education.[7, p.32]. The report notes that although the First Five-Year Plan included a special section on the problems encountered in women's education and the Second Five-Year Plan, too, emphasised the need for special efforts needed for educating girls and women in the country; they did not attempt to bridge the large gaps that exist between the education of boys and girls. In fact, through the analysis of both plans, the report shows that the increase in enrolment of boys and girls in schools was not designed to be equitable; the Second Plan not only widened this gap between the enrolment of boys and girls in education, but it did not with much greater extent than the First Plan. [7, p. 37]. In other words, the report argued that when

both plans' targets were achieved, the gap in the education of boys and girls would likely have widened. The report proposes that women's education should be considered a 'special problem', requiring specific kinds of concerted interventions. While a detailed analysis of all the recommendations made by the committee is outside the scope of this article, some suggestions included school level (primary, middle, high school) wise analysis of problems encountered with girls' education; infrastructural facilities like toilets and hostels; a mix of girls only and co-educational institutions; recruitment of women teachers; state and local level institutions to understand regional disparities; provision of scholarships. [7, pp. 192-200]. These recommendations exist alongside retaining the frame of special education for women as women. In the section on Curricula and Syllabi, the report contends that freedom and respect for the child's personality are as important as:

Nobility and spirituality of personal character, dutifulness and responsibility of citizenship, training for a useful vocation, profession or some social work in life and, as we are here concerned with the education of girls only, and the last but not the least, preparation for the duties of a mother, efficient homemaker, and a valued and esteemed colleague and companion in life, these are the objectives of a sound educational system which the curriculum, to the extent it is planned or controlled, should have in view (emphasis in the original). [7, p.83].

There is reductionism at work in the section on the Training and Employment of Women Teachers. From recognising that the presence of women teachers might generally create an atmosphere of support for girl children being sent to and retained in school, the report takes on an essentialist position on women as teachers. It says, Educationists generally admit in all countries that women are better fitted by nature, aptitude and interest to teach young children and guide adolescent girls. The care of the young is one of the tasks for which they are biologically fitted, and in teaching, they are able to transfer their maternal instincts, even if in a diluted form, to a wider field. There is no disagreement between educationists of the East and the West regarding the view that the education of young children—both boys and girls—should be entrusted to women who, by nature, are endowed with three major qualities essential for teaching, viz., "the desire to teach, something to teach and sympathy with the young" (quotes in the original). [7, p. 93].

For developing cadres of women teachers, the Reports suggests ways in which more women could be brought into the education sector through training, age relaxation for entering the teaching profession, scholarships and support systems, and recruiting women from local areas, to name a few. The suggestions made by the committee were supposed to guide the next five-year plans in the country. For the purpose of this article, it

needs to reiterate that the political-economy consideration of why women's education in India needed to be thought of as a unique problem often meant that the suggestions tended to be of feminising education.

Women's health is not dealt with separately in the Second Five-Year Plan, and it is only in a brief paragraph on Maternal and Child Health that mentions women and access to maternity services. [16, Chapter 26: Health, paragraphs 52-53]. Women as workers are mentioned in the Chapter on Labour Policy and Programmes, where two paragraphs elaborate on how the planners envisage planning for women workers. [16, Chapter 27: Labour Policy and Programmes, paragraphs 38-39].

Special attention has to be paid to women workers because of problems peculiar to them. Comparatively speaking, they are much less organised. They also suffer from certain prejudices and physical disabilities. Women are comparatively less suited for heavy work and are more vulnerable to situations in the industry that produce fatigue. They are used as arguments to justify views that are often held in support of lower wages for them. They are either given lower jobs, or the jobs they handle traditionally become women's jobs and carry lower salaries. The fact that simply because women's abilities are different does not necessarily mean that they constitute a lower class of workers is overlooked. [16, *ibid.*, paragraph 38].

With the Second Five Year Plan's aspiration for moving India towards a socialist pattern of society, social security and welfare measures for workers were envisaged by the state. In this context, the plan stipulated that protective measures such as maternity benefits, creche facilities, paid leave for nursing mothers, equal wages for equal work, and training facilities for better employment would be provided for women workers.[16, *ibid.*, paragraph 39].

And yet, even as separate measures are planned for women, there is an inevitable conjoining of women's development with the project of community and nation-building. In 1956, the Women's Department published a Handbook on Constructive Programme for women. In the preface, the General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee, K. P. Madhavan Nair, emphasised that there is immense work awaiting social workers in the sphere of constructive activities among women, maternity and child welfare. After care and social and moral hygiene, apart from the programme of general uplift and education of women. [3, preface].

Meanwhile, Mukul Mukherjee, Incharge of the Women's Department, maintained that Women have a very distinctive role to play in the constructive sphere. They must work for the nation and the state by working for their welfare. It means that all their welfare activities have ultimately to be fitted in the larger welfare of the

entire community...Let our sisters answer the call with all their traditional earnestness and vigour. The more they act, the more they will achieve. [3, Introduction].

The socialist pattern of society was proposed through the Second Five-Year Plan and did not envisage an Indian Man akin to the Soviet Man (Soboleva, 2017). Given that the ideas of five-year planning and socialist pattern of society were borrowed concepts from the then Soviet Union, the Indian man remains unmarked; instead, it is the Indian woman as the care-provider for and the nurturer of both the community and the nation that we find explications of in Indian planning. The Handbook, too, focuses on the welfare of women and children through the development of kindergarten centres, Pre-schools, maternity and infant health services, social education for women, arts and crafts centres and cultural and recreational activities. [3, p. 13]. Indian women, in the scheme of things, could be productive beings, but they remained tied to the *idea* of the nation.

5. Third Five-Year Plan, 1961-1966

With the Third Five-Year Plan period, India began developing a schema for long-term development extending over the next fifteen years. In this long-term approach, efforts were directed towards rapid expansion, self-reliance and self-regeneration. [17]. The plan's goal was 'achieving rapid economic development and technological progress and creating a social order founded on the values of freedom, social justice and equal opportunity.' [17].

The plan relies on the findings of the National Committee for Women's Education, discussed in the previous section of the article, and accepts its recommendations for promoting girls' education at the primary, middle and secondary stages of education. These included:

The provision of quarters for women teachers, special allowances to women teachers working in rural areas, condensed educational courses for adult women to enlarge the supply of women teachers, stipends for women teacher trainees, attendance prizes and scholarships, the appointment of school mothers in co-educational institutions and provision of the necessary amenities. To some extent, proposals on these lines have been embodied in the plans of States. It is suggested the various provisions which have been made in these plans should be reviewed afresh at an early date and, from the second year of the plan, additional steps should be taken to expand, specially those facilities which aim at enlarging the supply of women teachers and attracting them to service in the rural areas. [17, Chapter 29: Education, paragraphs 11 and 36].

The support for Maternal and Child Health is envisaged to be bolstered by creating a large pool of women nurses, auxiliary nurse midwives, health visitors and *dais* (village midwives). The five-year plans keep a

sustained focus on family planning; it is in the Third Five Year plan that we see an effort to link successful family planning with increasing employment opportunities for women and raising the age of marriage. [17, Chapter 32: Health and Family Planning, paragraphs 36, 42 and 68].

The Welfare Extension Projects (WEPs) were initiated by the Central Social Welfare Boards (CSWB) in 1954, first by establishing one project in each of India's 330 districts by the end of the First Five Year Plan and expanding to two or more WEPs by the end of the Second Five Year Plan, specifically aimed to bring social welfare to women and children in rural areas (Sherman 2021). The author has already discussed how social welfare in the country was sought to be directed through voluntary efforts. There was supposed to be more excellent resource distribution for expanding the existing welfare services in the Third Plan, even as the plan indicates anxiety about the immeasurability of the progress of social welfare. In other words, how is voluntary work to be evaluated if solutions are for local problems and there are likely to be meagre wages, if any. Therefore, rather than evaluating whether decentralised social work projects had worked, the plan simply assumes they did. [17, Chapter 53: Welfare Programmes Social Welfare, paragraph 6]. Three other programmes that were brought within the ambit of social welfare measures were (i) rehabilitating women and girls rescued from commercialised prostitution, (ii) prohibition and (iii) rehabilitation of displaced persons after India's partition. While the first two were made part of Social Welfare after enacting a law and resolution—The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, 1956 and a resolution passed by the Indian parliament on Prohibition, the third was a continuation of the first two plans. 'Unattached women and their children' were among displaced members who were supposed to look after by the State through Homes or infirmaries. [15, Chapter 38: Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons, paragraph 19].

In his work on Indian Planning during Nehruvian years, Taylor C. Sherman argues that the social welfare endeavours through the Central Social Welfare Board allow us to approach the state in a disaggregated manner and in so far as many programmes were run on women's energies, it is possible to contend that 'the CSWB pursued an approach to women's liberation that was decentralised, incrementalist, consensual and focused on inspiring women to help themselves' (Sherman, 2021: p. 300). While the author agrees that some programmes might have readily been acclimatised to women's needs, without an interrogation of the Indian rural that continues to mire in caste exclusions, taboos, hierarchy and violence, it remains unclear whether voluntary cooperation would trump caste institutions.

6. Fourth Five-Year Plan, 1969-1971

In the trajectory of India's planned development, the period from 1966 to 1969 is called Plan Holiday. The interruption, in large measure, is attributed to India's defeat in the war with China in 1962 and the disruption in

Foreign Aid in the context of the War with Pakistan in 1965. In June 1966, the Central Government devalued the Indian currency, Rupee, to increase exports. The Fourth Five-Year Plan, therefore, carried the burden of bringing India back to a development paradigm in the context of acute territorial insecurity. [18].

The Fourth Plan prioritised the expansion of elementary education, emphasising the provision of facilities for backward areas, communities, and girls. [18, Chapter 16: Education and Manpower, paragraph 16.5]. There was now a greater recognition that the withdrawal of children in the age group of 11-14 adversely affected girl children, and many states—Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh—fared poorly with student retention. The Fourth Plan endeavoured to approach this problem through pilot projects which, if successful, could be scaled up. [18, *ibid.*, paragraphs 16.8 and 16.11].

The role played by the CSWB towards giving grants-in-aid to voluntary organisations and support for adult women's education is appreciated in the Fourth Plan, but the problems with respect to lack of statistical data, management and accounting problems, lack of proper coordination between CSWB and State Departments of Social Welfare, that was highlighted in the Third Plan continue well into the Fourth Plan period as well. It remains unclear how the planners evaluated the success of welfare programmes and increasing welfare services without evaluation on a comparative scale (Rook-Koepsel, 2021).

Therefore, regarding how welfare measures were being operationalised in the plan period, the author examined annual reports for the social welfare department. The Annual Report of the year 1970-71 mentions that efforts had been made to build girls' hostels for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes at the middle and secondary stages to enable the availability of women workers from among the communities these communities for the welfare of communities themselves. [8, p. 14]. The Annual Reports for the years 1972-73 and 1973-74 contain chapters on women's welfare where priority has been given to hostels for working women in big cities and training camps for rural women. The building of hostels for working women was a new scheme that was started in 1972-73 to provide shelter for women who moved to the city for work. [9, pp. 31-32]. The training camps for rural women called the *Bhartiya Grameen Mahila Sangh* (Indian Rural Women's Organisation) were aimed at 'building up village leadership and ensuring a proper climate of public cooperation in the implementation of the various development programmes in the rural areas.' [10, pp. 27-28].

The Fourth Plan articulated a greater need to combine the Maternal and Child Health programmes with the Family Planning programme. Drawing on technological developments of the times, the plan envisaged that 25% of

all sterilisations would be performed on women. Salpingectomy was the removal of one or both of a woman's fallopian tubes. It would be in addition to vasectomies and condom distribution, which was, at a point, a new form of birth control and enabled safe sex practices. [18, Chapter 18: Health, paragraphs 18.29, 18.30, 18.33].

7. The Committee on Status of India Report - Towards Equality, 1974

During the Fourth Plan period, a Committee on Status of Women in India (CSWI) was set up in 1971. The committee's mandate was to study six areas of importance to women, which were identified as social, legal, political, educational, economic and employment. The *Towards Equality* Report of 1974, produced by the CSWI, has been identified as the founding text for women's questions in post-independence India. The *Towards Equality* Report contended that the constitutional guarantee of equality between sexes had not worked towards securing women equal status in society. The development process had affected men and women unequally primarily because the questions of sexual inequality were never grounded in politics. Further, it pointed out that even in the three areas identified by the Planning Commission for women's welfare: education, health and welfare, the proportional allocation of funds for programmes in these areas had steadily declined in successive plans, with funds for welfare measures coming down from 24.1% in the First Plan to only 11.17% in the Fifth Plan. [13, pp. 97-98].

In examining what the *Towards Equality* Report iterated about women's education, health and welfare, the areas in which women were given importance, it becomes clear that although there was an appreciation of the state's efforts, there were also critiques levelled at how women's questions were framed, and policies were operationalised. The report critiqued the planners for laying emphasis on different curricula for girls, with the accent on subjects considered suitable for them, such as domestic science, needlework or fine arts. It highlighted that this difference resulted in 'failure to provide subjects such as sciences and mathematics in most girls' institutions.' [13, Chapter 6: Educational Development, pp. 97-98]. The report recommended a common course of general education till the end of class X. It critiqued the national-level plans for educational development for not considering social and regional imbalances while drafting educational policies. Particularly worrisome, the report contended, was that enrolment targets set up by the Durgabai Deshmukh Committee of 1959 had not been reached even by the end of the Fourth Plan. [7, p. 236].

In some exciting vignettes about 'Attitudes to the Education of Girls and Women' in the Report, we come across instances, such as in the states of Himachal Pradesh and Nagaland, where the education of girls in the rural areas was seen to have consequences for the

progress of the state. This is because the report contends, the development of the state and the standard of living of its people depended on women's continued efforts in agriculture...Girls who completed their formal education in the villages did not want to continue living in villages to participate in agricultural activities...Most girls who complete secondary school develop a desire for white-collared jobs or urban life in some form. [7, pp. 262-263].

Elsewhere, the report's findings indicate that the 'strongest social support for girls' education continues to come from its increasing demand in the marriage market.' [7, *ibid.*]. How might a young country aspiring for women's education reconcile these situations where educated women develop aspirations that could undermine a rural agricultural economy for want of their physical labour or that education of women could become an aspiration precisely for enabling *better* marriages and not an outlet from domesticity?

The report notices that women's health and welfare had primarily been paid attention to from within the structure of marriage and familial life. When the government focused on women outside these institutions, it was from within the tropes of destitution and prostitution. [7, Chapter VIII: Policies and Programmes for Women's Welfare and Development, p. 308]. Through the Five-Year Plans, the report contends, that the actual allocation of investment in social services had been steadily declining. [7, *ibid.*]. Particularly critiqued was the CSWB and its ancillary organisation, which the report argued lacked social administration, and the departments did not display any clarity about what constituted welfare or development for women. [7, p. 310]. Quite significantly, the report argues that there has been a disjunct in how women's labour and work have factored into planning. This may observe from the fact that other plans did not contain any vision about generating and improving women's employment besides the Second Five-Year Plan. The report contends,

Even the Fifth Plan, which gives the highest priority to employment generation, appears to accept the present low representation of women in the labour force as a natural order of things, which will continue unchanged in the years to come. This expectation appears to be in direct

contradiction to the Planning Commission's own view that utilisation of idle manpower would be a tremendous force to speed up the process of development. It is also a denial of the Government of India's stated objective of the total involvement of women at all levels of national development. It is interesting to note that all the agencies engaged in programmes exclusively for women inevitably attach the highest priority to increasing women's earning power. But since these programmes are classified as welfare and therefore non-productive, they invariably enjoy low priority. [7, *ibid.* p. 319].

With respect to women's health, the report is mindful of the relationship between women's education, improvement of maternity services on the life expectancy of women and the impact of age of marriage on women and children's overall health. [7, p. 319]. Despite this recognition and a clear investment in family planning for controlling population growth, it was only in 1978 that the age of marriage in India increased from 15 to 18 for women and 21 for men. Early marriage of women continues to be an important issue in contemporary Indian politics. Quite recently, the Indian government announced its inclination towards increasing the age of marriage for women to 21 (Bose, 2022).

8. Conclusion

The Towards Equality Report recommended that a National Policy on Women's Development evolve in India in the light of Constitutional Directives and the international conventions to which India was a signatory. The report's publication became a precursor to the declaration of the period between 1975-85 as the United Nations Decade of Women. Wedded to the modernisation paradigm of stage-wise development, but with state planning and support, it remained unclear how India imagined its women to adopt more modern practices. If women remained mainly tied to the informal and agricultural economy and rendered un-productive, their labour used towards social service without adequate compensation, their wombs protected for national development but not without intersecting with development goals of population growth and increasing disparity between primary and higher education and laterally between girls and boys at all stages of education.

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