



প্রতিধ্বনি the Echo

Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed Indexed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

Published by: Dept. of Bengali

Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <https://www.thecho.in>

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Sex Education: Its Role and Significance in Gender-biased Society

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Abstract

One of the most controversial issues that the Indian society is facing over last few decades is the question of “Sex Education”. Huge controversies have been seen between those who advocate it and those who oppose it. Recently, the controversy regained a momentum when the Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said, “the so-called sex education should be banned in schools.” After huge criticisms from parents, academicians and common citizens on social media forced the Health Minister to give a clarification of his comment and he clarified that he was only against the vulgarization of the sex education as a subject.

It is needless to say that the contemporary world is circumscribed under ‘www’, i.e. World Wide Web where free flow of information and knowledge is most common. So, it is very important to have proper information about every thing that is related to an individual and society. Since sexuality is a fundamental or basic instinct of any animal it is important to have [proper knowledge on it. Like other biological activities, sexuality is nothing but inalienable activity of human civilization. Though many developed countries of the West have recognized the importance of sex education many developing countries like India is still suffering from social taboos and mental constraints to identify the enormous significance of sex education in society. Actually we are in the 21st century where the wave of cultural globalization is taking place and courtesy to internet things like pornography have become easily accessible matter.

Due to lack of sex education gigantic myths, superstitions and taboos are seen in Indian society about sexual activities which, it may be claimed, produces undesirable consequences in the form of gender discriminations. In other words, ignorance about sex often causes gender discriminations which in Indian society are seen in many forms; such as accusing women for being impotent, accusing and torturing women for giving birth to female child etc. Therefore, this paper emphatically advocates in favour of introducing sex education to eradicate the problem of gender discrimination in society.

Key Words: *sex education, gender discrimination*

Introduction: Priyanka Mahato, a twenty two year old house-wife, got married in 2010 at village Gurda under Barabazaar Police Station in the district Purulia. In 2012 she gave birth to two twin daughters which brought some perils in her life as her in-laws wanted son from her as heir of the family. After two years when she became mother of another girl-child the situation became too worse to get-rid-of. The in-laws including her husband could not quench

their anger by assaulting her physically but they forcefully made her drink pesticides. She died instantly leaving her three innocent daughters¹. This is not the story of Priyanka only. She is just a representative of those numerous women who are living such a pathetic life all over the so-called patriarchal Indian society. The root of such kind of cruelty lies in the traditional patriarchal society. It may be argued that the lack of proper knowledge regarding sexuality is one of the most significant causes of such kind of atrocious activities. To overcome such barbaric gender-biased problems, it may be argued that the introduction of sex education in formal educational system should be introduced immediately.

Due to lack of sex education gigantic myths, superstitions and taboos are seen about sexual activities in Indian society which, it may be claimed, produces undesirable consequences in the form of gender discriminations. In other words, ignorance about sex often causes gender discriminations which in Indian society are seen in many forms; such as accusing women for being impotent, accusing and torturing women for giving birth to female child, consider an unbroken hymen as the only and basic parameter of measuring virginity etc. the false consciousness on these matters cause serious gender discriminations in society. Therefore, this paper emphatically advocates in favour of introducing sex education to eradicate the problem of gender discrimination in society.

One of the most controversial issues that the Indian society is facing over last few decades is the question of "Sex Education". Huge controversies have been seen between those who advocate it and those who oppose it. Recently, the controversy regained a momentum when the Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said, "the so-called sex education should be banned in schools." After huge criticisms from parents, academicians and common citizens on social media forced the Health Minister to give a clarification of his comment and he clarified² that he was only against the vulgarization of sex education as a subject.

The Meaning of Sex Education: First of all it must be cleared that sex education is not something that promotes sexual or physical relations. It simply imparts proper information relating to sexual activities. Human sexuality bears biological, physical, spiritual and emotional aspects. From a broader view, 'sex education' may be defined as a programme of imparting knowledge regarding human sexuality, sexual anatomy, reproductive system, consciousness about sexual diseases, responsibilities etc. According to Leepson sex education is something that gives instructions in various physiological, psychological and sociological aspects of sexual response and reproduction. To Kearney sex education involves a comprehensive course of action by a formal institution, calculated to bring about the socially desirable attitudes, practices and personal conduct on the part of children and adults, that will best protect the individual as a human and the family as a social institution³.

In other words, sex education is something that imparts knowledge about all aspect of sexuality including family planning, reproduction system— including fertilization, conception and development of the embryo (reproductive cycle) and fetus, biological factors in sex, sexual orientations, sexual pleasures, values, decision making, communications, relationships, sexually transmitted infections (viz. AIDS) and how to avoid them, birth control methods etc.

Sex education: Different Controversies: In contemporary society all over the world issues like sex education have always been controversial. The most vivid confrontation on sex education has been seen between the so-called socio-cultural taboos and the cry of the hour. At one pole there are some who insist that the public schools should play no role at all in educating children about sex related matters. According to this pole sex education in schools might subvert sexual morality and cultural values of a particular society. Contrary to this kind of argument the second pole claims that introduction of sex education in public educational institutions will not only impart proper knowledge about sex but also it will eradicate many

misconceptions about sexuality and to some extent will reduce the problem of gender discriminations. Since sexuality is a fundamental or basic instinct of any animal it is important to have proper knowledge of it. Another controversy identified by E. H. Kellogg and J Stephan that in most developing countries sex education in public schools has raised some genuine legal problems, mostly on the confrontation between children's basic rights to education and knowledge on the vital area (sexuality) of human life and parents' right to control their children's education.⁴

The Background: The historical background of sex education can be traced back to the late 19th century in Europe. The progressive education movement of the late 19th century led to the introduction of social hygiene in the North American school curricula. But till the mid of 20th century most of the information on sexual matters were obtained informally. Sweden was the first (1957) to introduce comprehensive sex education as a compulsory programme. Subsequently, most of the countries of Western and Northern Europe (e.g. Denmark, West Germany, United Kingdom, Poland, Portugal, Netherlands and Switzerland) have introduced sex education during 1970s and 1980s.⁵ Socialist Eastern European nations did not respond to it till 1970 (except Romania) and the Republics of USSR did not cover more than the basic factual information on reproduction and hygiene. Eastern and South Asian Countries, despite having big problems like over-population, poverty and underdevelopment, are reluctant to introduce sex education in school curricula. The People's Republic of China has introduced sex education when Mao stated that population control deserves further study. Countries like Australia⁶, Canada and USA have launched sex education as an integral part of education system since early 1970's.⁷

Aims of Sex Education: The aim or object of sex education is nothing but imparting proper knowledge about sexuality which in any way is the natural instinct of animal beings. It is needless to say that the contemporary world is circumscribed under 'www', i.e. World Wide Web where free flow of information and knowledge is most common. So, it is very important to have proper information about every thing that is related to an individual and society. The basic aims of sex education can be categorized as—

- a) Sex education should aim to develop an open-minded, serious, scientific and respectful attitude towards all sex related issues in human life.
- b) Sex education should aim to give knowledge of personal hygiene of the sexual organs as it often causes many serious physical problems.
- c) Sex education should aim to develop personal responsibility regarding the social, ethical, moral and eugenic aspects of sex as affecting the individual life as well as the social life.⁸
- d) Perhaps, the most important aim of sex education is to spread an authentic knowledge of sex which may eradicate or abolish many myths or superstitions prevailing in society because these myths often use to play active role in practicing gender discrimination in society.

Sex Education in India: Issues and Concerns: In a traditional and patriarchic society like India the introduction of sex education has always been a great problem. Recently, especially since 1990's in the era of cultural globalization the demand for introduction of sex education has been increasing to a considerable form. Even the government of India has to respond to this issue by taking various initiatives in time to time.

It has been seen that various schools across different cities in India are arranging many seminars and workshops to create awareness among students on issues like health and hygiene. To focus on the history of sex education in India we will find that it was due to rapid population growth what made the government to initiate Family Planning Programme during 1950's. In 1980 the government of India introduced National Population Education project.

By this, some importance issues like the ideal of small family, problem of population explosion were highlighted.⁹ Later in 1994 on the backdrop of growing concern of AIDS some awareness programme have been taken in India. Among these the most significant as well as controversial was 'Adolescent Education Programme (AEP) in association with UNICEF and National AIDS Control Organization (NACO). But unfortunately it was withdrawn in the following year in some states.¹⁰

But unfortunately, a complete, comprehensive and rigorous curriculum of sex education in India is still missing a proper way. Recently the issue of introducing a comprehensive sex education has created a stir and lots of anxieties among people are seen. According to World Health Organization, sex education should be introduced in schools specially for children who are going through adolescence. Among the HIV infected persons in the world around 34% are between the age group of 12 to 19. In India around 31% of total AIDS patients are between the age group of 15 to 29. Even a study by the Department of Women and Child Development reveals that 53% of children of India have been victim of some kind of sexual abuse. Still, quite unfortunately the State of India is still giving a deaf ear to the issue.¹¹

Sex Education: A Tool for Reducing Gender Discrimination: Sex education is nothing but a tool for imparting authentic knowledge of sexual activities. The question that may be posed here: Is there any direct relation between sex education and gender discrimination? If so, then, can we say that sex education can play a positive role in reducing gender discrimination in patriarchal society? The answer to such questions can be formulated from the views of radical feminists who use to claim that any form of gender discrimination lies in the sexual relation between men and women in terms of obligatory maternity, sexual dominations etc. For centuries, it is the biological difference which determines different social roles for women and men. Women's biological capacity for child-birth and breast feeding have not only determined their role in the home but also made them unfit to participate in the public sphere.¹² The relation between sex education and gender discrimination can be traced from some pervasive socio-cultural constructions. Ignorance and false consciousness about sexual relation, in many cases create serious discriminations in society, the wretched victims of which are none but the women.

One of the pervasive social constructs is the will for having male child as the heir of the family. Therefore gender-biased people always want to have a son who can bear the identity of the family. This biased construct leads people to celebrate the birth of son and to mourn in the birth of a daughter. As a consequent women like Priyanka Mahato have to suffer physically and mentally for giving birth to daughters, while they do not have any control on determining the sex of the child.

In some cases the problem of gender discrimination causes serious problems to women if she lacks the ability of giving birth due to biological problems. But due to lack of proper knowledge on it people use to blame and torture her in an intolerable way. In some cases it is also revealed that even if the husband is impotent and unable to make his wife fertile, the in-laws use to blame as well as torture unfortunate woman physically and mentally as well. Even in some cases this problem leads to divorce.

Another factor which is too fatal to ignore is the dilemma of virginity, one of the social myth of patriarchy. The issue of virginity is nothing but a false consciousness or myth that the patriarchal societies have been constructed to dominate the women. Unfortunately, the virginity of a woman is still determined by the intactness of hymen and the bleeding of the first night. Whereas the medical science has established the fact that apart from sexual intercourse there are a good number of reasons of the losing of hymen before sexual intercourse. But due to lack of proper knowledge of it many people, guided by the myth

accuse and make some atrocious activities against women till the end of the life and compel them to live a life full of insult and shame, which often cause divorce between them.

Unfortunately, all these issues take important role for posing various atrocities over women and make them the wretched victims of the patriarchal society. Thus, it may be argued that a comprehensive and rigorous curriculum for introducing sex education in society is needed quite desperately. Only then, these forms of social evils can be uprooted from the society.

To conclude, it may be argued that the importance of introducing sex education to eradicate the problem of gender discrimination can not be denied. Apart from reducing gender discriminations it can also take significant role in combating the deadly diseases like AIDS, Cervical Cancer etc. and can impart sharp knowledge of the problems and risks of abortion, masturbation, unprotected promiscuity, problem of over-population etc. In other words a comprehensive sex education can help the present generation live a secured life. It cannot be only a typical curriculum for school. Simultaneously it should cover all psychological, physiological and social issues. There fore it is really the cry of the hour and without facing it through compatible policy the dream of all-round socio-cultural development cannot be achieved.

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