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## **Education and women: about castes, marriage markets and the illusion of destructuralism**

*Trends in Bildung international* (2006) 12, S. 1-6



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Clemens, Iris: Education and women: about castes, marriage markets and the illusion of destructuralism  
- In: Trends in Bildung international (2006) 12, S. 1-6 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-opus-50835 - DOI:  
10.25656/01:5083

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-opus-50835>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:5083>

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Iris Clemens

## Education and Women: About Castes, Marriage Markets and the Illusion of Destructuralism<sup>1 2</sup>

### Expectations towards Educating Women

Whenever it comes to education in general and of women in India and everywhere else in the world in specific, this topic is coupled with very high expectations and enthusiastic statements. Education seems to provide the solution for all problems that arise on the social and individual level of a society. Such expectations on education of women, especially in India, are related to the so called “development of the nation”, to the political and economic empowerment of women, to the improvement of public health and wealth etc. But education, whether for men or women, seen from a social point of view, is not as innocuous as the songs of praise suggest. In the contrary: It can have and has far-reaching consequences in many respects and these consequences are neither assessable in advance nor easy controllable. And of course most of these consequences are far from being intended.

To avoid any misunderstanding, it should be very clear that it isn't our intention to argue against education or educating women at all, but to point out some social and structural constellations which form the context for any engagement for education and which also may contribute to unintended problems. It might be helpful to be aware of these structures while planning any further educational interventions. Therefore the following discussion takes a functional perspective.

### Education and Caste

In his book “The great Indian middle class” for example, Varma clearly states that education in India is *the* new cast and is even more effective than the old ones.

„Not surprisingly, today India sends about six times more people to the universities and other higher educational establishments than China; however, roughly half of India's population is illiterate, while China's adult literacy rates are close to eighty percent. In fact, there is little doubt that the lopsided development of education in India is directly linked to the structure of Indian society, and 'that the inequalities in education are ... a reflection of inequalities of economic and social powers of different groups in India' “ (Varma 1999, S. 55, and Sen, citation acc. to Varma).

In this perspective the outcome of the educational system in India does not provide solutions for the needs of the whole Indian society at all, and it is particularly doubtful that it helps to improve the position of the poor and powerless, to increase equality and justice. Instead, it rather reflects primarily the demands and claims of some powerful parts of this society. It seems that Panikkar's argumentation is pointing into a similar direction on a content level of education when he is discussing a “whiter Indian education”. This Indian historian stated that the liberal and secular character of education in India is undergoing a fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> Lecture held on the ‘Conference on International Women's Day – Contemporary Indian Women: Celebrating their Spirit and Success’ on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2003 in NISIET (National Institute for Small Industry Extension Training) Hyderabad, India by Iris Clemens, German Institute for International Educational Research, Frankfurt, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Clemens, I. (2004): Education and Women: About Castes, Marriage Markets and the Illusion of Deconstruction, Man in India, Vol. 84, Nr. 3-4, S. 247-255.

transformation, influenced by certain social groups. The characteristics of this new kind of education are: romanticisation of traditional knowledge, celebration of religious beliefs and emphasis on conformism, says Panikkar, and this orientation on nationalism and Hinduism is again useful for some powerful groups<sup>3</sup>. Therefore the Indian history even seems to be “rewritten”<sup>4</sup> to support this specific perspectives.

The inequality Varma is addressing, can be made visible very easily by looking at the access to education. Inequalities that were already existent in India before colonial times in access to education for privileged and disprivileged have been “liable to be exacerbated” (Bhattacharya 2002, p. 7) by the colonial education system. For Tamil Nadu for example Radhakrishnan stated that although the Brahmins made only three percent of the total “Presidency population”, they counted for about 63 to 66 percent of the total matriculates/BA graduates hundred years ago. The non-Brahmin Hindus, about 86 percent of the population only count for about 24 to 23 percent during that period from 1901 to 1917. So on the one hand, education even strengthened the hierarchical structure of the Indian society, defined by the cast system, on the other hand, “in numerical terms the increase since 1900 of both matriculates and BA graduates was substantial enough for the emergence of an educated middle class even among the latter (the non-Brahmin Hindus. I.C.)” (Radhakrishna 1996, p. 112). This is the middle class Varma is focussing upon in his recent book and which emerged in the traditional hierarchy because of education.

### Education and Social Stratification

The question that now emerges is: If education is a new cast in India, what’s about the rest of the world, for example, the so called Western countries like Germany? While making biographical interviews about education in February 2003 in Hyderabad (A.P.), there was one question the interviewees asked me rather frequently in return after the interviews: How is the German kind of social structure? Do you have communities like we have? Are there castes like in India?

And my answer was always: No, but ...

What kind of but?

In the last decades, the so called West is described very often from a point of view of individualism, modernism and especially in terms of deconstruction of the old patterns of classes, social levels etc. (destructuralism). In a so called individualised society we should expect that the earlier determined differences of chances in life, resulting from traditional structures, will be continuously removed, collectivist patterns of orientation will lose their importance and individualised personal relations are supposed to become more and more prominent (see Wirth and Lüttinger 1998). But let us have a closer look to social stratifications and patterns in Germany, and what role education plays in this respect.

First, there is no doubt that also in the West, and also in Germany there exists a social stratification (socio-economic status, SES). In most assessment scales, this stratification is primarily defined by occupation. Although it is true there is a gradual disconnection of SES and education and participation in the educational system is increasingly independent from SES over the last decades, it is also true that particularly the classical *Gymnasium* serves as a “watershed” (Baumert et al. 2002, 170) for high and low status groups. This is even more alarming, because access to education is free in Germany. So already on this general level, a self stabilizing circle of SES and education seems to exist: SES is connected to visit a *Gymnasium*, which in turn stabilizes SES.

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.indowindow.com/sad/](http://www.indowindow.com/sad/) (05/04)

<sup>4</sup> See [www.stanford.edu/group/sia/Events/Panikkar\\_speech.html](http://www.stanford.edu/group/sia/Events/Panikkar_speech.html) (03/04)

To get a deeper insight into the specific kind of the social structures of a particular society, concrete reproduction processes of those structures can be analysed. Following Bourdieu (1976) particularly marriage strategies can be seen as strategies of social reproduction. Therefore I will use the example of marriage or partner selection in general to explain my “but” regarding the social structure in Germany and the influence of education on it.

## Education and Marriage

Again, it seems to be rather clear in India, that education is (together with cast and religion) of an utmost importance in partner selection within the arrangements of marriages by the families, as also our own research in Gujarat indicates (Eckensberger et. al. 2000). But if one would follow a destructuralistic point of view on modernism or individualism, one would expect that the social structures in a western society like Germany should be flexible and open particularly with reference to partner selection which should be a private affaire guided by personal concerns only. Consequently one would expect theoretically that people from all kinds of families, social and educational backgrounds and so on will mingle and, after all, also marry, because beside other criteria, concepts of individualism focus especially on *freedom of choice* for the individual (see Oysermann, Coon and Kemmelmeier 2002).

There has been done a lot of research around this issue in Germany in the last years, which, however, unmask these assumptions as a myth. Only a few examples from such research will be mentioned here, just to highlight the point in question:

1. Blossfeld und Timm (1997) found for Germany, that there is a strong long-term tendency for even increasing educational homogeneity regarding the educational level of the marriage partners and no evidence for a significant increase of marriages between men and women from different educational levels during the last decades. In the opinion of these authors, this increase of educational homogeneity over the cohorts does not support any idea about a common wide spread, long-term tendency for more destructuralism, as it is connected to the theories of modernism. In contrast to this thesis the development of a high educational homogeneity over the cohorts indicates an ongoing *closing* of the social structure and social levels.  
As an explanation for this empirically supported pattern the authors refer to the educational system and the public and private possibilities it provides for the genders. Hence for men and women with equal educational level the probability to meet “just in time” will increase (they will be of the same age when completing education etc.) and also their interests, biographical planning etc. may mutually “fit”. Therefore, the educational system “influences” the marriage markets directly and indirectly.
2. A survey of Wirth and Lüttinger (1998) also does not find any support in its empirical data for the thesis of an increasing destructuralisation, as it is discussed in the literature. In two samples of 1970 and 1993 they found a clear inclination of marrying within the own class. These patterns of homogeneity were even found in unmarried couples just living together, where the assumption of a “free” choice and of strong individualism was particularly strong in theory. All findings suggest that there was no considerable change of the patterns of partner selection over the last years.  
They summarize that marriage patterns are in fact the results of individual action processes which are based on a formal free choice, but that this choice takes place in a in pre-structured social

frame, and this frame still causes homogeneity rather than equality: „*Who does not meet, does not mate*“ (Wirth and Lüttinger 1998, p. 52).

3. Klein (2000) too found homogeneity in status of marriage partner and even homogeneity in the age of the partners which was also in contrast to the theoretical assumptions about an increase of individualism in the West.
4. Finally Becker (2000) found an intergenerational reproduction of educational biographies within families. As a possible explanation for his findings he suggests that parents out of lower levels of society tend to overestimate the costs of education and underrate the returns of it. Due to this estimations the education level in the family will remain stable over the generations.

We can summarize that contrary to the assumptions of theories about modernism or destructualism the empirical data clearly suggest that there are social demarcations between certain groups of society which are triggered or even produced by education. Although the affiliation of subjects to such groups is not explicit like in case of castes or communities in India, education seems to be the most important criterion of this distinction. It is clear that the education of ones parents in Germany certainly not only influence what kind of education one may get, but the educational background and setting itself provides at least a statistical probability with whom the person will “fall in love” and finally marry.

Coming back to the question stated earlier, the disillusioned conclusion could be that education is not only the new cast of India, but also the old one of Germany. As mentioned, in Germany education is completely free of charge (from primary school to university) and there are almost no formal and / or legal restrictions of access to education (the only exception is a distinct level of achievement or grades for specific studies at the university). In contrary, there is even the compulsory obligation to attend school up to a certain level which is also strictly controlled. But nevertheless education works definitely as a medium for exclusion from groups and reproduction of privileges.

### **Educating Women in India**

From this specific perspective of looking at the function of education for stabilizing or destabilizing the social structure of a society, also education of women in India should be analyzed and evaluated in terms of possible non intended implications. Requests for more efforts to bring education to all Indian women may lead to some new components which should be recognised and kept in mind. It has to be kept in mind too, that especially in the so called backward communities, but not only there, education for women is still not the rule. The title *Caste as Woman* by Vrinda Nabar points in this direction and she wrote: “The preference given to boys over girls in matters such as education is hardly peculiar to India. But the extent of the insistence on such discrimination as being historically and traditionally prescribed and therefore indisputable even in the present day probably is” (Nabar 1995, p. 68).

If we can say that the function of education is not onedimensional under the perspective of social structuralisation and reproduction of inequality, any efforts to improve the educational level of women in general will certainly touch these structures. Anybody who has the honourable goal to bring education to the women in India - specially in the rural areas - should be aware very clearly about one point: Trying to improve the level of education of women does always mean to intervene into the whole pattern of the society and its social structures. It means to intervene in hierarchy, too, because if we can see education as a new

cast, trying to educate women means trying also to increase their position in the hierarchy. From this point of view, there are winner and loser.

Middle-class girls are now educated largely as a concession to a superficial social change in the view of Nabar and an educated wife has become a “necessary appendage” (ibid), at least a BA degree is needed to get a good match. But women also have to be careful with education, if they don’t want to be at a disadvantage. They always look for a better educated husband than they are (see Kapur 1973), and men in return don’t want a wife which is better educated than they are, as we also found in a study about marriage rules in Gujarat (Eckensberger et. al. 2000). That means, however, that it is a risk for a woman to be “too” educated, because if she is, she must look for an even more educated man. In addition she will be quite old for marriage and less prospect grooms are available because the majority of them will be already married. But also in low castes it can be dysfunctional for women and girls to be well educated. As Dube says, it has been found that parents may even restrict the education of girls to avoid a situation in which the daughter refuses to practice the traditional occupation of her caste, because in that case, it will become very difficult for them to marry her to an appropriate family. “Not formal education, but the capacity and willingness to do traditional work tends to make a girl useful in the husband’s family” (Dube 1996, p. 4). Restriction of education can be seen as marriage strategy in this context.

But as research for example in Germany shows, education also has some influence on the marriage affinity of women in general. It was found that high educated women tend to marry later, disengage more often from an unsatisfactory marriage or do not marry at all (see out of many Diekmann 1990). One explanation for that behaviour of high educated women from the perspective of the family economy is that they are not benefiting in the same way from the traditional division of labour than low educated women or even high educated men do, and therefore, high educated women have the lowest rate in marriage affinity (ibid). In the Anglo-Saxon countries this phenomenon is discussed under the keyword of “independence effect” (Ross and Sawhill 1975). Because high educated women will have better chances to get a good job and payment, they will become economically independent and less willing to make compromises in case of an unsatisfactory matrimonial situation.

It is of course only speculative to transfer these findings to the Indian context, and of course education is not the only relevant factor. But education can be seen as one reason, which has definitely the capacity to initiate changes in the structures and in the behaviour of the educated persons. Apart from this nowadays one can read more and more articles of an increase of divorces in many Indian newspapers.

Marriage pattern are only one example for the interwoven relations of education of women and social structures. But it clearly shows the critical points in changing single elements in a social system. In most cases, the complexity of the consequences of interventions is heavily underestimated. The example makes visible that any intervention in this field is almost inevitably confronted with the power of old deep structures of a society and hierarchy and therefore one should be prepared not only for open as well as for hidden resistances, but also for unexpected and unintended changes of the society, which in themselves call for new solutions. In India and everywhere else.

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