

PhD dissertation
What Inclusion Leave Out:
Dalit Women, Feminism and the “Afterlives of Educational Policy in
Contemporary India

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SUMMARY

This dissertation tells the story about the beginnings, transformations and ‘afterlives’ of a set of education policies and programmes (the National Education Policy of 1986 and the Mahila

Samakhya programme) that introduced new discourses around gender, literacy, and empowerment in India, bringing a host of unlikely players to the table.

Delving into the history and politics of a state-initiated women's empowerment and adult learning programme (Mahila Samakhya) launched in India in the mid-1980s, this dissertation explores the long-term and intergenerational outcomes of educational policies, through the medium of life histories of rural Dalit ('low caste') women who participated in this programme in the underdeveloped district of Chitrakoot in Uttar Pradesh (North India). By critically examining the under-studied intersection of adult literacy, gender, and social transformation at a key historic moment, as India moved towards economic liberalisation, and the world towards 'mainstreaming' gender and empowerment programmes, this thesis asks: How do educational policies become real? What new rural female subjects were produced as a result of these policies? How did these changes impact official discourses, social relations and institutions?

This multisite ethnography, through life histories, a content review of literacy and curricular material, and interviews with key players in the life of one particular educational policy-programme regime, builds the idea of a policy 'afterlife'. In other words, it explores how gender, adult education, and literacy discourses live on in time, and spread beyond contained policy and programme spaces, across scales, actors, and disciplines.

The findings of this dissertation depart from existing research on adult women's literacy which has been dominated by positivist evidence-based studies highlighting short-term impacts, supporting simplistic assumptions that making women literate will guarantee their 'inclusion' in mainstream development. The in-depth life histories presented here, by contrast, reveal that the process of learning to read and write is laborious, precarious, and often results in profound tensions between notions of individual and collective empowerment within families and communities. The findings also show how labouring Dalit women value literacy for self-making, playing leadership roles in their families and communities, building institutions, seeking non-traditional employment, and to change gender and caste norms within private and public spheres. These aspirations transcend the 'functional' uses of literacy and in fact speak to the fairly radical nature of the feminist education project, in terms of providing the most marginalised with critical tools to navigate their worlds.

By theoretically analysing an arc of dynamic interrelated actions—from policy to practice and back to women's lives—this dissertation provides a unique perspective, that of the subjects of the policies themselves, revealing how forging new subjectivities pushes up against gender and caste norms. In doing so it explores relatively uncharted waters in relation to grassroots feminism and transformative literacy and adult education in India, offering a grounded and complex understanding of the relationship between literacy, gender, inequality and empowerment and the exercise of power.