Chapter Seven

Conclusion: Need for a New Intervention
I began this research project with an intention to explore gender dimensions in school education. A major research for this is that I have been driven by two interests simultaneously — sociology of education and gender of sociology. A research of this kind, as I have agreed in introduction, emerges out of this interface of education and gender.

Sociology of education is a domain in Indian academics with its critical tradition of learning. We have witnessed the proliferation of new critical literature in sociology of education, particularly in areas relating to ideology and curriculum, schooling and reproduction of existing social order and politics of knowledge. Likewise, gender studies in India have gained widespread legitimacy. There is hardly a good university in the country, which does not offer courses or conducts research in gender issues.

In this sense it can be said that as a researcher, I am privileged. Because, I have been enlightened by all these meaningful findings and research insights. That is why for me, this work offers tremendous challenges. Am I doing yet another normal/routinized research work or am I adding new information, new theories or even new interpretations of the existing data.

I see myself as a humble researcher trying to expand my horizon, make sense of the world around me. That is why, it would be an act of intellectual snobbery if I claim absolute ‘originality’ — something that has never been said. Instead, I would say that my research has possibly succeeded in accomplishing three simple yet meaningful objectives.

- First, my research adds yet another ethnographic/empirical data to the ever-expanding literature on gender dimensions in sociology of education.
- Second, as this work emerges out of a dialogue between two specialized traditions of learning — sociology of education and
gender studies —— the interpretation that this work provides, I tend to believe, does justice to the complexity of the entire issue.

Third, another meaning of research of this kind is that it helps us to identify the concrete educational/pedagogic measures which can be adopted to create a more egalitarian gender sensitive and libertarian pattern of education.

A closer look at the preceding chapters suggests that the work began with an understanding of the social role of schooling. Because schools exist not only to distribute knowledge and degrees and diplomas. School exist also to serve important social functions —— disciplining and motivating children, giving them a worldview and above all, forming their identities. It was therefore important to see how these hidden agenda of schooling could be explored. It was at this juncture that I got significant insight from feminist writings on education. It became clear that in the construction of 'masculine' or 'feminine' identities, schools too play a significant role.

In fact, in the process of exploring further, I also inquired into the domain of meaningful debates on identity formation —— how one grows up and begins to see the world in 'masculine' or 'feminine' ways. It was also necessary to relate this knowledge to the social history of Orissa. Because, the school that I investigated, could not be separated form the mainstream Orissan society.

While studying the school with all its details and specificities, I observed the following:

The culture of schooling does demonstrate gender stereotypes that can be seen in the larger society. In fact, not much effort has been made to alter the existing hierarchies and create new values. Instead my study suggest that the prevalent culture of schooling continues to reinforce and reproduce the existing gender stereotypes i.e., equating men with active, rational, instrumental public domain and
confining women to the invisible, domestic, passive, emotive private domain.

These gender hierarchies are clearly visible in what schools regard as legitimate knowledge i.e., in textbooks. From mathematics to history, from civics to literature —— I could see the gendered character of knowledge, how it privileges men, their agencies and achievements and remains somewhat indifferent to the voice and language of women.

☐ A closer look at the biographies of a number of students has indicated this complex process of growing up —— how these children, at this formative stage of their life cycle are evolving and coping with the existing stereotypes and cultural beliefs and practices.

☐ It is of course true that these observations are not altogether unknown in social sciences or public intellectual discourses but then as I have already suggested, these findings, which are based on a solid and detailed work, on an empirical setting intensify a critical potential of the critical sociology of education. Because we can now say —— with more confidence and empirical evidence —— what feminists and critical sociologists of education have been arguing:

School education is not free from gender biases and that is why it is continuing to accomplish a conservative function in society.

It is obvious that no grand generalization is possible simply on the basis of this work. That is in a way the limitation of any Ph. D work, which generally concentrates on a micro domain. Nevertheless, this work, despite the limitations of its scope, is indicating a social trend. Moreover, as the school I have studied, which I have already mentioned, is a vernacular medium school located in a normal lower/middle class mainstream Orissan society, what we gather from it becomes all the more revealing. It indicates not the exceptional. Instead it indicates what is common, normal and
recurrent. That is why, I can safely say that my study becomes a representative reading of normal practice of schooling, particularly in Orissan society.

A research of this kind needs one to pose a series of complex questions. First, in postcolonial society, schools were expected to accomplish a radical function i.e., creating an equal society. Imagine the way the Kothari Commission in the sixties expressed this grand optimism:

The destiny of new India is being shaped in our classrooms.

It was also hoped that the school as a secular institution would really succeed in overcoming many traditional prejudices and beliefs, which may be rooted in some of the religious practices. I am not saying that in postcolonial India, our experiences with school education have failed completely. There are indeed very positive stories to tell. More and more schools are coming up, more and more children are enrolling, more and more new branches of knowledge like science, technology, computer are being introduced in schools and more and more upward social mobility is taking place.

Even while accepting these achievements, I would say that schools in India are also continuing what sociologists would call the function of reproduction of the existing order. In this particular case, we saw how schools could reproduce the prevalent gender stereotypes, instead of radically altering them. This is however not to suggest that every school going boy or girl accepts what they experience at school or internalise the prevalent masculinity or femininity. In that sense, the effect of schooling can also be neutralised by the other experiences in life —— say an egalitarian family milieu or a radical kind of politico – cultural socialization. Furthermore, schools alone cannot be blamed for the continual prevalence of gender stereotypes. The other institutions in society also play a significant role in this process. After all, sociology of education teaches us that the school as an institution cannot be separated from the wider socio – political milieu.
But then in this research, my primary focus was on school education and its role in the consolidation of gender identities. That is why, I wish to suggest the following institutional/pedagogic measures to redefine schooling so that it can create a gender sensitive society. Before that, there is a point to make. I know I am a sociologist, not a social worker.

The objective of my research is to understand, theorize and conceptualize, not political intervention. But then I am equally aware of the fact that a piece of social research acquires special meaning only when it helps us to overcome the prevalent darkness and suggests new ways. That is why, I am concluding this research with a reflexive/interventionist note:

1. It is important to be especially careful about the culture of schooling. For example, no discrimination, explicit or implicit should be made on gender lines. The girls ought to be given equally challenging tasks that require physical stamina, hard work and analytical rigour. Likewise, the boys ought to be continually sensitised so that they can learn to see that everyone, irrespective of sex, is capable of doing meaningful work. It is also important to sensitise boys so that they learn to appreciate and internalise in their own beings, what is otherwise degraded as feminine characteristics —— softness, sense of humility, patience and humbleness. This sensitivity must manifest itself in every aspect of school culture —— in classrooms, in playgrounds, in extra curricular activities and in decision-making bodies.

2. Schools need to orient their teachers perpetually. Because in the ultimate analysis, teachers as representatives of mainstream adult society, communicate with children in schools. If educated are not properly educated, there is no way we can overcome existing prejudices and biases. That is why, through regular workshops, discussions, meeting with scholars, artists, social workers would be
needed to orient the teachers so that they begin to appreciate the need for a new, equal gender sensitive harmonic society.

3. A lot of restructuring in the domain of school knowledge is needed. School texts ought to be rewritten and the hitherto silent voices of women must be incorporated into school texts. These texts must tell children that no good world is possible to create unless men and women are engaged in this endeavour as equal participants. Therefore, texts must tell the child about the life histories, biographies and achievements of women of different kinds —— women in science, literature, politics, art, cinema, sports, social work as well as ‘ordinary’ women and their everyday struggles, endurance and suffering. Likewise, it is also desirable that the texts tell the child about the damaging consequences of sadistic, aggressive, dehumanised ‘masculinity’. Instead, what is needed is a shared human value for both boys and girls and these values are intellectual curiosity, analytical skill, alertness of mind, rational perception, intuitive imaginative sensitivity, love for nature, art of relatedness, patience, silence and concern for other people.

This is a long battle. Perhaps, all of us —— educationists, sociologists, psychologists, social workers, teachers, textbook writers and above all, parents —— have to participate in this struggle.

If my research contributes even in a minimal way to the enrichment of this libertarian agenda, I would consider it meaningful.