



(Un)veiling Desire: Re-defining relationships between gendered adult education subjects and adult education programmes

Priti Chopra *

University of Greenwich, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges constructions of the 'gendered illiterate Indian villager' as a homogenous group of people who are empowered through acquiring literacy. I strive to displace homogeneous representations of gendered 'illiterate' subjects through ethnographic accounts of diverse people's realities in different villages in Bihar, India. I argue that the circumstance under which a relationship between gendered adult education subjects and adult education programmes gets constructed impinges on notions of: norms, interpreting and translating Others, networks and empowerment within and outside the context of adult education programmes.

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1. (Dis)empowering the gendered adult education subject

Adult education programmes that aim to develop empowerment through literacy may not take into account the material realities and desires of diverse gendered adult education subjects. Re-defining relationships between gendered adult education subjects and adult education programmes may facilitate the inclusion of communication practices of programme participants in other fields (Bourdieu, 1977) of discursive practice linked to their material realities (see Street, 2001; Collins and Blot, 2003; Basu et al., 2009). I draw on an ethnographic style research approach to contribute to an understanding of the conditions under which a relationship can be developed between adult education programme practice and empowerment. This research perspective has involved exploring the daily life activities, roles, responsibilities and desires of three research participants living in different villages in Bihar, India. Bihar, with a population of approximately 90 million people, is the third most populous state in India.

80% of the population lives in rural areas and more than 40% live below the poverty line (Indian Government Planning Commission Eleventh Five Year Plan 2007–2012). One fourth of the entire population belongs to the marginalised sections of the government classified Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Indian Government Planning Commission Eleventh Five Year Plan 2007–2012).

Bihar has one of the lowest 'literacy' rates, especially for women in rural areas, in the country (Mathew, 2005).

The two main state education initiatives launched in Bihar were the 'Bihar Education Project' (BEP) and the government adult education campaigns (Total Literacy Campaign, Post Literacy Campaign and Continuing Education). BEP and the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) were initiated in 1991. The BEP, operating with financial assistance from UNICEF, the central and state government, aimed at 'Education for All' at the elementary level (Kumar, 2001). The TLC, first implemented in Madhepura district in October 1991, was extended to 16 of the state's 38 districts by 1994. Government evaluations recorded that the TLC experience was only successful in four of the districts; Madhepura, Madhubani, Dumka and Dhanbad (Kumar, 2001).

Within this context, I explore situated understandings of gendered practices of empowerment through three multi-sited ethnographic vignettes¹ titled: Laila: the enterprising Dalit sharecropper; Nathu: the caring father; and Sagar's protest. Laila and Sagar live in different villages in Sitamarhi district, Bihar. Nathu lives in a village in Begusarai district, Bihar. All three of them have not participated in any formal education programmes. They have, for short periods of time, participated in the non-formal adult education programmes of local non-government and community based organizations. They opted out of the programmes as they could not make meaningful connections between what they were taught and their everyday life requirements and material realities. The issues of bonded labour, dowry practice, sharecroppers' rights, gender discrimination and domestic violence highlighted in their vignettes still remain areas of concern in Bihar and India (see

* Correspondence address: School of Education, University of Greenwich, Mansion House, Bexley Road, Eltham, London SE9 2PQ, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 0 20 833187674.

E-mail addresses: cp87@gre.ac.uk, choprapriti@hotmail.com.

¹ I have used pseudonyms for all the research participants.

Swain, 2009). Adult education programme practice in their villages did not engage with any of the practices rooted in these issues and claimed to empower through the acquisition and use of literacy.

I argue that conceptualisations of power as a commodity, through which the 'disempowered-as-illiterate' subject moves towards becoming an 'empowered-as-literate' subject, forces constructs of identities into a powerful/powerless dichotomy which does not always do justice to diverse experiences. The claimed empowering intentions of adult education programme and policy practice through literacy may, in reality, contribute to the dominance of restrictive disciplining and regulatory discursive practices (see for example Street, 2001; Robinson-Pant, 2009). As Basu et al. (2009: 1) suggest:

While literacy has an important evaluative position in theories of development, there is no 'theory of literacy' that adequately capture and predict its complex role in processes of social change, and account for the role of literate (and illiterate) identities and practices in shaping social relations, capacities and aspirations.

My conceptualisation of literacy draws on the work of New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 1991; Street, 1993; Collins, 1995) which places an emphasis on the plurality of literacy practices and meanings. Ethnographic interpretations of literacies and numeracies, through an NLS lens, offer ways of exploring situated heterogeneous communication practices in adult education programme practice (see for example Street, 1995; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996; Aikman, 1999; Barton et al., 2000; Martin-Jones and Jones, 2000; Hornberger, 2002; Robinson-Pant, 1997, 2004; Street et al., 2006). My ethnographic accounts reveal that communication practices, at different levels of engagement, involve diverse literacies and numeracies. In spite of this, knowing how to read, write and do arithmetic was not conceived in any of my research accounts as a key catalyst for transforming structures of understanding within unequal relations of power. Neither was the adult education programme, in all the villages, the space within which the research participants' sense of agency developed and evolved individually or through forms of collective action. As Brandt and Clinton (2002) claim solely relying on the 'local' to define the meaning and forms of literacy may ignore the material dimensions of literacy and its role in human action. Similarly, Collins and Blot (2003) argue that conceptualizing literacy as an autonomous skill or as multiple locally situated practices is not enough for defining the meaning and forms of literacy. This has implications for the claimed empowering and transformative intentions of adult education programme and policy practice. By locating their interrogation in the domains of literacies, power and subjectivity they forefront situated historical processes intertwined with literacy practices and deconstruct assumptions about "consequences of literacy" (Goody and Watt, 1963 cited in Collins and Blot, 2003: 6). Through an analysis challenging assumptions about the relationship between text and power they discuss "subtleties, transgressions, and subterfuges" (Goody and Watt, 1963 cited in Collins and Blot, 2003: 7) sharing space with officially validated and legitimized discursive practices. They make explicit the dialectics between assumptions about the 'uses of literacy' and conceptualizations of "identity, authority, and visions of the self and the future" (Goody and Watt, 1963 cited in Collins and Blot, 2003: 8). Located within the conceptual framework proposed by Collins and Blot (2003), I deconstruct adult education policy and programme perspectives of literacy needs in order to engage with the (im)possibility of self-representation within adult education policy and programme practice. Through three ethnographic vignettes I express real tensions between assumptions about literacy needs and empowerment in order to explore ways of

transforming structures of understanding the gendered 'illiterate' subject in both the process and the product of adult education learning. My ethnographic style research on discursive practices does not transcend assumptions about literacy but rather assumes that literacies, in plurality, are "about the practice of representation as a means of organizing, inscribing and containing meaning...[and] about practices of representation that disrupt...existing...ideologies, values and experiences that constitute 'otherness'" (Giroux in Lankshear and McLaren, 1993: 367–368).

Drawing across the disciplines of postcolonial theory, gender studies, development studies, education, and sociology I take an interdisciplinary approach to develop an analysis of the circumstances under which a relationship between empowerment and literacy may develop further the process of understanding literacy, identities and social change (see for example Basu et al., 2009).

2. (De) constructing myths: researching the gendered 'illiterate' subject

I met Laila, Nathu and Sagar in 2001 while I was living in their villages during an ethnographic research study of adult education programmes and practice in different districts in Bihar. Though I claim that the shared research purpose of my ethnographic accounts is to interpret and re-present refusal to be 'the illiterate subject', my accounts do not, in absolute terms, reveal what they really think or feel (see also Labov, 1982; Bruner, 1990; Alvarez and Urla, 2002; Mishler, 1991; Riessman, 2001; McAdams, 1993 on narrative analysis). As imagined realities, their accounts cannot, through a deconstructive lens, claim to be the subjective reality of their multiple selves represented through their actual speech, feelings and lived experiences (Kearney, 2003).

My ethnographic accounts are partial truths (Clifford, 1986) located yet moving across time and space. I attempt, on the one hand, to "close epistemic gaps between past, present, and future to secure the truth and authority of experience" (Visweswaran, 1994: 79) in re-presentations of 'the gendered illiterate subject'. On the other hand, these fluid yet fixed partial truths, in many fragmented ways, only serve to voice my research intentions to explore and frame circumstances under which a relationship may be conceptualised between adult education programmes and empowerment of gendered adult education subjects.

Here I align myself with the words Cornwall et al., drawing on Sorel in Jennings ed. (1999), use to describe the validity of research in (de)constructing 'essentialist myths' in order to (re)present realities that influence action:

The word 'myth' is often used as a synonym for 'not true'. . . Myths . . . may be nurtured with selective statistics, with case studies, with quotes, with vignettes. . . in using the term 'myth' here, our intention is not to join in. . . 'myth busting'. It is, rather, to inquire into how stories. . . may be dissonant with. . . the realities they describe. These stories are not necessarily based on untruth, nor on faulty data. They might well extrapolate from one setting to another, use partial and cautious findings to make incautious claims. But they may also be based on the soundest of fieldwork, the most scrupulously rigorous research design. This in itself has little bearing on whether or not they make suitable material for myth-making. What makes them 'myths' has nothing to do with what they tell us about the world. It is the way in which they encode the ways of that world in a form that resonates with the things that people would like to believe, that gives them the power to affect action. (2007: 4–5)

In this context Laila, Sagar and Nathu's 'stories' (Jennings ed. 1999) become accounts of resistance impacted on by notions of:

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