

New Light in New Times?

Women's Songs on Schooling Girls in Rural Rajasthan

○ Ann Grodzins Gold

Early in 1997, I spent two months living in the village of Ghatiyali, District Ajmer, Rajasthan. I stayed in the home of Bhoju Ram Gujar, my friend and frequent co-author. Bhoju was at that time a Government Middle School teacher (he is now a headmaster); his wife, Bali, is not literate. At that time they had three daughters, ranging in age from about ten down to four, and one two-year-old son. During this stay in Ghatiyali, Bhoju and I were engaged in two separate research projects: one on oral histories of environmental change; and the other on environmental education, both formal and informal. The latter project originally had no specific focus on the gender gap in literacy, but the more I spoke with the school children, the more interested I became in the reasons for so many female children remaining outside the school walls.

In this brief article my primary focus is uneducated herd girls' own perspectives on school, expressed in recorded interviews and songs. Then I shall turn to the ways some adult Rajasthani women who have awakened to the value of education articulate their views in slogans and moving lyrics. I have one main aim, and one secondary expectation. Most importantly I present female viewpoints: What do daughters, wives and mothers think of the skewed literacy and school

attendance ratios for girls and women? How does lack of education affect their lives and hopes? What do they wish for their own futures and for their children? Along the way, I hope to reveal something of the existing conditions in which schooling for girls and local values may seem to clash so discordantly so that even some decent and reasonable men would take extreme positions against girls' education. Such attitudes are rooted in complex social and economic conditions, against which girls' education is realistically portrayed in women's consciousness-raising efforts as bringing "new light" into the house.

In rural Rajasthan, low school attendance and low literacy rates persist in spite of the government commitment at national, state, and local levels to universal education. According to statistics drawn from the 1991 Census of India, the state-wide literacy rate in Rajasthan was 38.55 per cent; broken down by gender, for males it was 54.99 per cent and for females it was 20.44 per cent. Of the total rural population only 30.37 per cent were literate; and the literacy rate for rural females in 1991 was a startlingly low 11.59 per cent (Sharma and Retherford 1993; Sharma 1994).

I have spent much of my anthropological career recording,



Women labourer demonstrates writing skill, Gandher, 1997

translating, and interpreting oral traditions, and gathering many kinds of knowledge from un-lettered persons of both sexes. In the course of that work, my profound respect for the richness and complexity of oral knowledge only increased. After two decades of interacting with Rajasthani women, I had failed to contemplate or to conceptualize the disadvantages of being non-literate — as were most of my female village acquaintances. Village women to me had always seemed remarkably competent, and confident of their mastery of all skills necessary for their lives. It was they who instructed me, and gently mocked my multiple ignorances. It was only in 1997 when I traveled to Jaipur city with Bhoju's wife Bali that I was hit by the difficulties and embarrassments of being non-literate in a literate world. While in the village and countryside, it was always I who was lost and she who led, now she had to ask me where we were. I could read the signs in Hindi and English.

Obstacles and Risks

A few weeks before this excursion, I had a painful encounter which highlights the intractable nature of some cultural obstacles that continue to slow the process of schooling girls in Rajasthan, and elsewhere in India. Bhoju and I had gone to interview the father of Arami, Bhoju's cousin Shivji's wife. Arami, like Bali and most young women of the Gujar community in the mid-nineties, was uneducated. In her girlhood she had herded family livestock while her brothers studied. After her marriage to Shivji and before the birth of her two daughters, she had worked as a labourer to supplement her husband's income. Now she stayed at home with her small children. Arami's father had been in

the army, and had a partially transformed perspective on the world that seems to come to farmers with military experience.

Our recorded interview with Arami's father began on a good note. He talked with us at length, mostly about changes in agricultural technology. Eventually, we switched to the topic of education. Bhoju asked him about the choices he had made in educating his children. He told us of financial sacrifices undertaken to prepare his sons for cash-earning jobs by sending them to a costly boarding school — an unusual step for a rural Gujar. I then casually inquired whether he had ever sent his daughters (of which he had several) to school. This affable man bluntly replied, "If I send them to school, they might run off, and then I would have to set them on fire, or take my rifle and shoot them!" Our conversation pretty much screeched to a halt, and Bhoju and I soon departed.

Later Bhoju summarized this rough moment: "First his brain went bad, and then your brain went bad." Bhoju himself, as a teacher who has

seen something of the world, knows the value of educating daughters. As a Gujar, he also understands how other Gujars feel. Among Bhoju's and Bali's relatives and neighbour, a familiar pattern of boys to school and girls to herding prevails. Bhoju eloquently explained Arami's father's position. A family's entire social status is demolished by one wayward daughter. No decent marriages can be arranged for the siblings of a girl who elopes with a schoolmate.

Listening to Bhoju, I could not judge Arami's father to be a patriarchal monster, or a dull-witted, ignorant man. Like most human beings he wants the best for his children who he loves — daughters as well as sons. He makes choices as wisely as he is able, in a society that is rapidly changing but nonetheless socially conservative. For Gujars and other agriculturist communities in Rajasthan, to educate girls is not only to gamble with the family honour, but to do so without visible potential winnings. If Arami's father stressed the dire risks entailed in girls' education as significant disin-



Herding children singing, Ghatiyali 1997

centives, many others, as we will see, stressed the lack of positive outcomes to be anticipated. This combination leaves little in the balance on the side of schooling daughters.

Herd Girls' View Point

One day an aged Mina woman described the sufferings of her youth to Bhoju and me, and contrasted these with modern times (*naya zamana*) — “like in the song.” Her granddaughter who had been listening knew the song to which she alluded, and gave us a few lines. I was arrested not so much by the words — which are rather banal compared to many women’s expressive lyrics — but by the song’s opening image of a flood: two well known rivers overflow their banks and wash away a major city. This suggests a tide of radical and irrevocable change, although the innovations described in the following lines will strike urban readers as far from revolutionary.

*The Chambal broke, the Banas broke, and Udaipur flowed away,
Indira got down at the station,
what did she have to say?*

*I’ve installed electricity, faucets,
street lamps too,*

*And installed your sister-in-law’s
brother [husband] in a salaried
job!*

Electricity means women do not have to grind grain; water taps mean they no longer have to go to the well; streetlights may imply greater freedom of movement. Rural Rajasthani women have experienced these technologically implemented conveniences as a flood sweeping away previous structures of daily existence. But note that the song grants wage-earning careers only to husbands — presumably literate ones.

According to the singer, this song was still popular among Mina girls, over ten years after its heroine, former



Mali girls singing

prime minister Indira Gandhi’s assassination. Like many Mina girls, this young woman had spent her childhood and early adolescence herding. Totally uneducated, she told us that she attended night school in her marital home, where living conditions were more comfortable than those in her natal village. She was proud of her life in modern times as compared to the hardships her grandmother had endured.

Not all nonliterate or marginally literate wives are content with their situations. Other songs, recorded from women and girls, speak of domestic and emotional problems resulting from the skewed education system. These reveal that young women perceive that the gender gap in schooling leads directly to marital trouble. Illiterate brides are badly treated, even abandoned, by literate husbands seeking companionship. Another song, recorded in 1993, revolves around this problem. I heard it from a group of unschooled pre-adolescent herdgirls of the Mali (gardener) caste:

*In the school the parrot speaks;
in the garden the peacock speaks.
Over there, husband’s sister, your
brother went to study,*

*From one side comes the
motorbus, from the other comes
the car,*

*Your brother is dancing
[English] with the girls
(Gold and Gujar 1994:80).*

Uneducated females married to educated boys fear their husbands will go astray in the world of modern transportation and foreign “dancing.” While the Hindi word for dance, *nachna*, evokes veiled women bending and twirling gracefully among themselves with no males present, the English “dance” that appears in this song represents the Westernized “disco” scene of which villagers are aware from images in the media. Forlornly, the uneducated herdgirl complains to her sister-in-law of their brother/husband’s desertion to that alien world. Other songs also voice the fears and anticipate the sorrows of unschooled women paired with literate men.

One song, performed by pre-adolescent Mali girls on the night of the harvest festival of Holi in 1993, is the only performance I have recorded originating in the village that speaks of secondary schooling for girls. The young singers had just done a song about Holi, the female demon about

to be consigned to a joyful bonfire. They then spontaneously broke into a rousing tune, its lyrics proposing new, perilous, but thrilling possibilities for women:

O innocent Shivji, my younger sister is going to school while riding on a motor bike.

O Shivji, she studied to the sixteenth class and joined the army.

She beat the policemen with four sticks and hurt them, and the police grabbed her and took her away.

Girls in Ghatiyali have yet to mount bicycles, let alone motorbikes, except as veiled, side-saddle passengers. Careers in the military and the police are highly respected, desirable and competitive professional options for educated young village men. This fanciful song seems uncertain where women's educational and professional achievements might lead. It sounds an adventurous note, but also warns of chaos and punishment. It seems to give voice simultaneously to girls' hopes and parents' fears.

Economics of Education

Bhoju's niece Kali was an incredibly high-spirited, independent-minded, bright-eyed girl. People shook their heads and said she should have been born a boy. I interviewed her in 1993 when she was probably no more than nine years old. Her pragmatic attitude was already crystallized.

Ann: So, do you go to school?

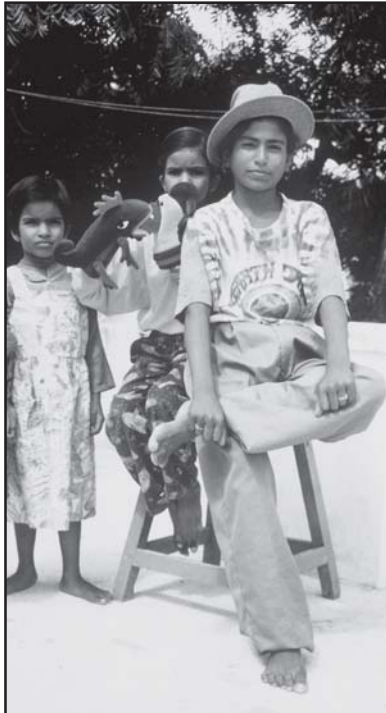
Kali: School, never! I never went to school, never.

[She talks about her work helping to graze the family's sheep.]

Ann: Is grazing good or is studying good?

Kali: Grazing sheep is very good.

Ann: Why?



Kali Gujar dressed in her brother's clothes, Ghatiyali 1997

Kali: Sheep give us income, what does reading give? Sheep give us income. Suppose I do go to study, so, I'll hardly get a job!

Ann: So what is good about sheep?

Kali: Our own house's sheep? They give lambs, so we sell them; they give dung, and we sell it.

In 1997 Kali, maybe 13, had been married but was still living at home where her work is valued. Her parents will demand that her in-laws give her some hefty silver ornaments before they relinquish their claims on her energetic labour and cheerful company. Kali continued to emphasize the economic aspect of her lack of education. It struck me, though, that she was well aware of what she was losing. If not bitter, she was just slightly acidic when she spoke of it.

Ann: Your brother goes to school. Why not you?

Kali: If I went to school then who would do the housework?

Ann: Do you go to the night school?

Kali: My mother doesn't send me.

Ann: Why doesn't she send you?

Kali: She says, "What's the use of sending you? What kind of master will you become?" [tum kaun sa marsa ban javeli].

Kali's older brother, Shankar, is in school, in the eighth grade. He dresses well, but is not very good at his studies. Kali never directly expressed her envy of Shankar, but when the girls of Bhoju's extended family prevailed on me to take pictures of them posing in their finery on the roof, Kali disappeared to return triumphantly transformed, wearing Shankar's clothes.

Kali's mother's taunt, "What kind of master will you become?" is a painful one, but it reflects perfectly the way families such as hers gauge the potential worth of school education. Even at a younger age, she produced the line, "I'll hardly get a job," to justify not attending school. Abraham and Lal, in their excellent account of female education in Jaipur district, confirm this to be a widespread attitude on the part of Rajasthani parents: "Envisaging the future of their children, all the parents saw education as a path to success." And success is defined as "gainful employment in the service or business sectors" (1995: 132-3). In numerous interviews with parents, teachers and students, Bhoju and I pursued this issue to find education consistently and firmly linked in all minds with the world of jobs (*naukri*). Yet jobs are scarce, and women's opportunities are especially limited.

Education Via Slogans ?

I want to turn now to messages of modernity — specifically of "mahila vikas" or "women's development" as

portrayed in activist pamphlets in the local language. I draw largely on one particular booklet which I first encountered in the hands of men. Anticipating a visit from a district-level officer, Bhoju's fellow teachers in the village of Palasiya had decided it was necessary to paint slogans about literacy on every available wall. A pamphlet was their source for slogans, many of them rhymed couplets in the original. I give a few examples, of which the first seemed to be the most popular in Palasiya and its environs.

1. One daughter will be educated, seven generations will be liberated!

Ek beti parhegi, saat piri taregi

2. Every daughter has a right to health, learning, respect and love.

Har beti ka hai adhikar sehat, shiksha, maan aur pyar

3. If we educate our daughter, we increase knowledge and honour.

Beti ko ham parhaye, gyan aur maan baraye

4. Just one vow is to be made: give your daughter an education.

Ek pratigya leni hai, beti ko shiksha deni hai

5. Let brothers do the housework too, so girls can go to school!

Bhai bhi ghar ka kaam karaye, tabhi to bahna parhne jaye

6. Girls and Boys are equal, be it health, education, or virtues!

Larki-larka ek samaan, hon svasth, shikshit gunavan

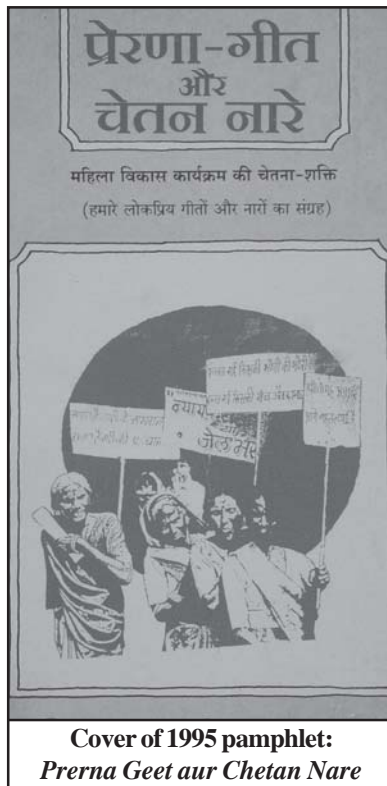
7. When a daughter goes to study, our own knowledge will increase.

Beti parhba javeli, apnon gyan barhaveli

8. Daughters' education is the family's protection.

Betiyan ki shiksha, parivar ki suraksha

At my request, Bhoju later



**Cover of 1995 pamphlet:
Prena Geet aur Chetan Nare**

obtained a copy of his colleagues' book which was the source of the above slogans. Its title, *Prena Geet aur Chetan Nare*, translates something like: Inspirational Songs and Consciousness-Raising Slogans. The book is authored and produced by members of a women's collective, working under the auspices of the well known and successful Jaipur-based Women's Development Programme (WDP). An eloquent introduction begins, "The work of awakening human society to women's issues is a very heavy challenge." It ends with a wish for women who read the book to "make these songs and slogans your own," so that, "Joining our voices and melodies, . . . one day we will be successful. . . ." (Upadhyay 1995: i-ii). Although the introduction is written in Sanskritized Hindi, the songs are in the Rajasthani vernacular, the only language in which most unschooled village

women of this region feel comfortable.

Girls are taught to perform such songs for school assemblies. On Republic Day at the big Government Middle School in Ghatiyali, the spacious courtyard had a single row of chairs for parents to watch their children recite, sing and dance in honour of the national holiday. On these chairs sat a handful of men — fathers, all in western clothes. Clustered outside the walls, peering over them, were more parents in Rajasthani dress, men in loincloths and turbans; women in skirts and wraps, often with veils pulled over their faces. This segregation by gender and class, or profession, is symbolic of the school remaining an alien space.

Bhoju's own wife, Bali, stayed home claiming childcare burdens, although Madhu her oldest daughter was in the show. Madhu and her two classmates beautifully performed this song:

Don't get me married when I'm young,

Let me study, let me study!

My sister Kajori is un-schooled, she has eight children,

and doesn't know how to raise them, so the lot of them are sick.

Let their sickness be less!

Don't get me married when I'm young,

Let me study, let me study!

Many literate sisters go to work at jobs, but

The illiterate sit, their veils pulled down,

In their homes, darkness and shadow.

Let me bring the new light!

Don't get me married when I'm young.

Let me study, let me study!

Self-defined consciousness-

raising songs and slogans — heartfelt productions of mobilized women — hurl themselves melodically against the surrounding culture of gender discrimination, to which uneducated herdgirls’ songs sorrowfully allude. Notice that this song unites the idea of education with health, good housekeeping, and even jobs for literate young women. Yet among the herding and farming communities, at least, it is quite likely that the mothers and grandmothers of these girls are happily plotting weddings. Like Kali’s family, and even Madhu’s female relations, they believe good marriages to be more essential for their daughters’ future than any schooling.

Broken Hearts

I found many songs in the booklet to be unexpectedly moving, genuinely “inspirational,” even when I had never seen or heard them being performed. Some have individual authors, while others were apparently composed by the collective. They carry powerful emotions, persuading me that at least some parts of the modernity project have been fully internalized. I shall give two of these texts in full. One speaks sadly of discrimination between daughters and sons; the other is about the danger, and tragedy, of girls “missing the train” to literacy.

The first is titled: “This Evil Custom Goes On (discrimination Between Daughters and Sons)” [*Reet Buri ye Chali (Beti-Bete Mein Bhed Bhav)*]:

*Listen, Listen, O my company of girlfriends,
this evil custom goes on, O sisters,
without knowledge, she remains empty!
When I was born, a broken potsherd,*



Kali Gujar Dancing, Ghatiyali, 1993

*When brother was born, a nice plate,
O sister, Knowledge.
They send my brother to study at school,
but they have me do the herding work,
O sister, Knowledge.
My brother wears pants and a sports-shirt,
but I’m wearing only a thin cloth wrap,
O sister, Knowledge.
My husbands’ brother’s wives read books aloud,
But they make me scrub the plates,
O sister, Knowledge.
When a gardener plants two trees,
That gardener alone is the one to water them,
O sister, Knowledge.
All sisters, go and study!*

*I too shall not stay empty,
O sister, Knowledge.
[Upadhyay 1995: 116]*

*Sun sun e mhari sang ki saheli reet buri ye chali e bahan,
vidya bin rah gai khali
main jalmi jad phutya thikara
bhayo jalamyo jad thali
ai bahan, Vidya
bhai nai bhejain parhan madarsa mharai sun karavai guvali
ai bahan, Vidya
bhai to pahanlai pant-busharta mahari chunar lir vali
ai bahan, Vidya
dorani jithani mhari pothi banchai
mharai sun manjavai thali,
ai bahan, Vidya
ek mali doy per lagay
sichan vala vo hi mali
ai bahan, Vidya
sari bahana parnau jaiyo
main bhi na rahun ab khali
ai bahan, Vidya*

This song reproaches parents who practise multiple forms of daughter-neglect and son favouritism, leaving their girls hungry for knowledge among other things. It is one among many with similar themes.

Wishes for Daughters

The upbeat closing refrain of the “discrimination” song is absent in another composition titled, “Daughters’ Education: The Learning Train.” This one has an author, and expresses a mother’s acute personal sorrow at seeing her daughter kept away from school due to household needs.

Train of Learning

The learning train is going along,

Oh, the learning train is going along.

*See the rich boys slip right inside,
See the children of the poor
remain outside.*

*How many girls are climbing in?
But half of them descend again.*

The learning train is going along,

Oh, the learning train is going along.

*Everyone comes to the station
when the train halts there.*

*But sometimes money, sometimes
marriage get in their way.*

*How many girls are climbing in?
But half of them descend again.*

The learning train is going along,

Oh, the learning train is going along.

*My beloved daughter says,
“[Mother] please register me at
school.”*

*I say, “I’d really like to but how
can I register you at school?”*

*When I go to do labour work, and
you go to your school,*

*Then when we’re both outside the
house,*

Who looks after baby brother?”

*My daughter’s tears flow, my heart
just breaks,*

*Before our eyes the education
Railroad pulls away.*

*My daughter’s tied down at home,
But the learning train is going
along,*

*Oh the learning train is going
along.*

*[Upadhyay 1995:98; song by
Kamalesh Yadav, Mahila Vikas
Karyakram, Banra]*

Shiksha ki Rel

*Shiksha ki rel chali jaye re
are shiksha ki rel chali jaye*

*paise vale chhore dekho
bhitari ghus hi gaye*

garibon ke bache dekho

kaise bahar hi rahe

kitti chhori charh jaye

adhi niche utar aye

shiksha ki rel chali jaye re

are shiksha ki rel chali jaye

kite sare steshan ate,

jab ruk jati gari

kabhi paisa kabhi shadi,

beech mein a jati hai sari

kitti chhori charh jaye

adhi niche utar aye

shiksha ki rel chali jaye re

are shiksha ki rel chali jaye

meri ladali bitti kahe

*ki bhaiya mera nam likhade iskul
mein*

main kahun bahut hi chahun par,

kaise nam likha dun skul mein

jab main jaun majuri karne ko,

tu jayegi apne iskul ko

*ham honge donon jab ghar ke
bahar*

kaun dekhega tere bhaiya ko?

*bitti ansu bahae, meri chhati phat
jaye*

*shiksha vali relgari samne se
nikal jaye*

meri bitti ghar se bandh jaye re

par shiksha ki rel chali jaye re

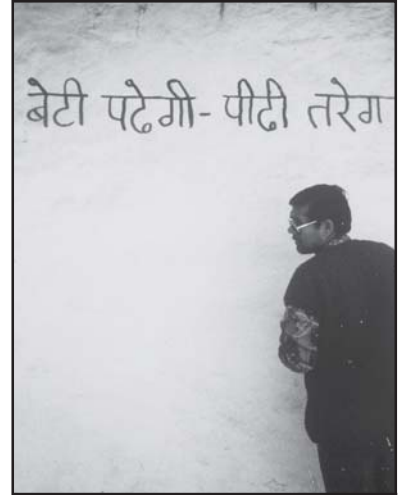
are shiksha ki rel chali jaye

The Stick of Modernity

Another song is called “Times have changed!” (*Jamanu Badal Gayo*). It begins by promoting literacy, and goes on to praise famous Indian women. This lengthy song then addresses just about every aspect of tradition that modernity rejects, admonishing people to renounce

black magic, stop child marriages, reduce population and live in happy small families, and educate their daughters. Such is the package deal, imposed by what Nita Kumar has called the “stick of modernity” (2000: 199).

School itself is aptly associated with an authoritative stick intended to coerce young persons into new and unfamiliar behaviours and modes of thought. One day Chinu, Bhoju’s middle daughter, decided to play school master to her younger sister and cousin. She was about six years old at the time, and her pupils were three or four. She separated herself from them with a table and took up a stick, wielding it in imitation of teachers at the village primary school she attended. I have heard teachers



Teacher painting wall slogans

harangue village students at morning assembly to “forget” everything they had in their minds before arriving at school, to sweep their brains clean, to erase them like slates. Education thus explicitly pits itself against family, home and tradition.

In activist women’s compositions the New Light prevailing in the New Times is meant to subvert familiar gender hierarchies, and not without



Madhu and friends at school assembly, Ghatiyali 26 January 1997

good reason. As we have seen in the case of Arami's father and throughout this article, resistance to girls' education is stubbornly embedded in slow-changing social structures and lack of economic opportunities. It is easy to agree that all the factors disadvantaging women are linked. Child marriage, for example, works directly against keeping girls in school — as Madhu's Republic Day song recognized. Preference for sons, based on their potential future contributions to household income, means that girls are given herding chores so that boys can study. The fundamental sources of gender discrimination lie in property rights, patrilineal descent, and patrilocal marriage. It is also my hunch that a major fount of many invidious gender practices I encounter in Rajasthan is the culture of honour or *ijjat*. Fear of lost honour is what caused Arami's father to make his terrifyingly matter-of-fact statement about the mortal peril of schooling girls.

School Against Home ?

Women's development organizations are probably correct to perceive that

multiple changes will have to precede gender equity in education, or at least to accompany it. Yet this stand, however logical, perpetuates in the arena of gender the split between home and school that has sabotaged efforts for universal literacy in India for well over a century. I find myself wondering what would happen if the literacy campaigns in Rajasthan were to renounce their attacks on child marriage, child labour, household sex

roles, brother favouritism, and all the rest of it. Could we just have initiatives for nothing but reading, writing, and arithmetic, and miraculously produce literate child-bride goat-herds? Even as I write this I realize it sounds not only heretical but absurd. Yet I remain troubled, as have many authors on education in India, by a situation in which the school system is hopelessly pitted against the people's own culture. Women's development groups — with all the best intentions — redouble this opposition. Might such energy and emotional dedication be rechanneled into demands for more gender parity in economic opportunities, better schools and teachers, and a curriculum relevant to realistic rural futures.

One auspicious sign for future female literacy may lie in the wishes expressed by mothers for their daughters' education. Not only activists, but even women fully enmeshed in the present gender web sometimes express these aspirations, revealing that even those unable to decipher slogans may nonetheless read the writing on the wall.



The "stick of modernity": Chinu Gujar plays school



In conclusion, I turn to words I recorded at the end of an interview with women labourers, young wives cheerfully doing the work of breaking and carrying rocks. They had been conscripted into an adult literacy project as a condition of obtaining this work, and their wages were to be withheld until they could successfully sign their names.

These women disparaged their own success at the modernizing project, asserting that “Wet clay won’t stick to a baked pot” (*paka handa ka gar na lagai*). But, as with the author of the education train song, they had different aspirations for their daughters’ lives. The last words I heard from an authoritative voice among them, as they returned to their hard work, were these:

“I may not be literate (*padhi likhi*) but you should teach my daughter! . . . Our lives are half over, but our daughters [have a future], so take care of them.”

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Eager girls reach for books, primary class, Palasiya, 1997