

Transgression or Liberation? Education – Going Beyond the ‘Charmed Circle’

What is the call of Philippine Duchesne to us as educators today? Seeking to answer this from the Indian perspective, we realise that the frontiers are both “out there” and “deep within”. The patriarchal structures that surround us impose their own parameters, the charmed circle demarcating the boundaries of safety, respectability dictated by male-dominated authorities. We are forbidden to transgress these, yet the invitation is clear – liberation and empowerment for women can only come in the wake of such transgression.

Overcoming challenges due to gender bias in offering both knowledge and skills has been an ongoing struggle. From its very inception, the Indian Province has worked tirelessly to provide high quality education to girls and women as a means of empowerment. Such a holistic education, designed on the basis of the needs of women and girls, seeks to build their capabilities and prepare them to seize opportunities in both public and private domains. This education necessarily has to move beyond the purely academic into the realm of skills and capacities. Nor is the empowerment limited to skills-development and capacity-building. Integral to the process is the encouragement to think critically and ask questions – this is crucial in our efforts to bring about a lasting change in societal attitudes and behaviour that discriminate against women. This presentation seeks to share some of our experiences and some of the strategies adopted in the process of the above.

- Dr. (Sr.) Ananda Amritmahal
Sophia College for Women

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I would like to begin this discussion with a story from Indian mythology – an episode from the Ramayana. The Ramayana is a complex and intricate story, which forms part of the collective unconscious of almost all Indians. For many it is not just poetry, but sacred scripture, with a strong didactic element. References to it are immediately recognised, without need for explanation or context. However, for the benefit of this audience, I will give a brief outline of the story to this point.

The hero, Rama, has been exiled to the forest for fourteen years by his father, the King of Ayodhya. He is accompanied by his wife Seeta, and his brother Lakshman. They dwell in an ashram in the forest for a number of years, but this idyll comes to an abrupt end when Ravana, the King of Lanka, hears of Seeta’s beauty and is overcome with desire for her. With one of his most trusted advisors, he plots her abduction.

A few days later, a lovely golden deer is seen wandering near the ashram. Seeta catches a glimpse of it and is immediately enamoured of it. “Oh, how beautiful...!” she gasps. “Please, please, get it for me – it’s so lovely!” Rama can deny Seeta nothing, but he is loath to leave her unprotected in the forest, where there are rumours of rakshasas (demons) lurking in the shadows. Calling Lakshman to him, he entrusts Seeta’s safety and wellbeing to him, and warns him not to leave her until his – Rama’s – return. Then, he is off to catch the golden deer.

But this is a most elusive deer – in fact, it is a rakshasa in disguise. In spite of Rama’s prowess as a hunter, the deer eludes capture, leading him by devious paths further and further away from the ashram. Finally, when capture or death is inevitable, it transforms itself back into its original shape, and falling to the earth, calls out in a marvellous imitation of Rama’s voice – “Help! Seeta! Lakshman! Help me! I am dying!” By this time, Rama has realised that mischief is afoot and sends an arrow to the rakshasa’s heart, silencing him forever, but the damage is done. Anxious and weary, he begins to retrace his footsteps back to the ashram.

Meanwhile at the ashram, there is open rebellion. Seeta and Lakshman both hear the supposed plea for help, and Seeta desperately urges Lakshman to ignore Rama’s prohibition and leave her to go to his brother’s aid. Lakshman endures her pleas and then her reproaches as he steadfastly remains at his post, following his brother’s orders. But the reproaches get wilder as Seeta gets more and more frantic. Finally, with the last accusation – “This is what you were waiting for, wasn’t it? The moment when your elder brother was no more and you could have me – now I understand! No wonder you’re just standing there – refusing to go and help him. You’re despicable – ”

Lakshman can’t take any more. Quietly, he says, “Bhabhi – sister-in-law – you don’t know what you are saying. But, very well, I will go. Only you must promise me something.” With the tip of his bow, he draws a circle in the earth around the little hut. “Promise me you will stay inside this

circle. Within it, you will be safe and protected. Once you step outside, you will be at risk, vulnerable – the protection will no longer work. Promise me, Bhabhi.”

“Anything, anything – I promise. Only go, quickly...!” And with a last, quick, backward look, Lakhsman vanishes into the forest.

Any child knows what happens next. What necessarily must happen next. A frail old hermit appears in the clearing. He is obviously weak, exhausted, unable to go any further. “Water...” he gasps, “..please...give me some water.” In keeping with the tradition that enjoins hospitality and welcome to all travellers, particularly hermits and sadhus, Seeta hurries into the hut to get him some water. As she emerges, pitcher in hand, she remembers her promise. “Come closer to the hut,” she urges the old man. “I am not allowed to go beyond that line, but you can come within the circle, and drink this water.” The old hermit tries, but is too weak. He sinks down exhausted just outside the circle. “Please, daughter ...” he begs. “Please...” his voice trails away.

Seeta cannot hold back any longer. Yes, she had promised, but what was the risk? She would be just outside the circle, and could jump back in immediately. And this was an old man, too weak to do her any harm. And he needed her help now. How could she hold back, whatever the risk to herself?

She steps out of the circle bending down to raise the old man’s head, hold the water to his lips. The next moment, she is caught in a vice-like embrace – the old hermit is actually Ravana in disguise, and she is his captive. The rest of the Ramayana follows.

If I have spent some time on this story, it is because it is so central in the collective psyche of the Indian people. The line traced by Lakshman – the Lakshman-rekha – has come to be synonymous with the boundaries of decency, of family honour. In common parlance today, it means a strict convention or a rule, never to be broken. The consequences of breaching this boundary, of transgressing beyond its limits, are always serious. Never mind that Seeta was using her own initiative, her own judgement. Never mind that she was making a choice based on compassion, as well as on the age-old injunction of hospitality. She had transgressed. Sub-text: women must stay within the charmed circle – the space that has been assigned to them by patriarchal forces. They have neither the wisdom nor the discernment to make the correct choices. They can be hoodwinked, taken advantage of. They must remain within the parameters of patriarchal control, and this is reinforced by limiting their access to information, to education, to economic independence, to critical and analytical thought. The menfolk, the patriarchs, will determine what is right for them, and thus, they will be kept safe.

And so, a culture that had once valorised erudition and wisdom above wealth, and celebrated its savants, whether male or female, had changed gradually to the point where chaste and decent women were, axiomatically, deprived of all possibilities of education and confined to the domestic. While courtesans and some royal women did enjoy the advantages of learning and were highly accomplished musicians, poets, writers, the world of most women had shrunk to fit within the prescribed bounds of the Lakshman-rekha. Through the medieval period and the period of colonial rule, the situation was compounded and aggravated, the proscriptions and barbed wire fences were set in concrete.

With the 19th century, however, a change was gradually visible. This was the era of the great social reform movements in India – the abolition of sati (immolation of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband) and of child marriage, the possibility of widow-remarriage, the education of women: these were some of the major issues that engaged the attention and concern of Indian men and their English overlords. Tremendous upheavals were in the making, particularly in Bengal and in Maharashtra, both of which regions saw what was virtually a renaissance both in social and in cultural terms. Feminists today point out that the social reform movements did bring about a vast improvement in the condition of women, but it is interesting that in all the discourse surrounding the issues, the voice of the women concerned is notably silent. Little or nothing is recorded about what they thought about these matters.

By the second half of the 19th century, enlightened men were ensuring that their wives were being educated, were exposed through their reading to a wider world than that circumscribed by the ‘narrow domestic walls’ that were their lot until then. The first woman doctor, Anandibai Joshi; the first woman graduate and woman lawyer, Cornelia Sorabjee; the first woman novelist, Kashibai Kanitkar; the first woman autobiographer, Rassundaradevi; the first woman theologian, Pandita Ramabai – all date back to this time. Ramabai Ranade helped her husband, a learned judge, in preparing his judgments, and in translating documents from English; Savitribai Phule helped her social reformer husband to set up schools for girls and homes for young widows, while both women remained in the shadow of their illustrious husbands. Nor was it only knowledge and professional skills that were being transmitted. Tarabai Shinde wrote her scathing *A Comparison between Men and Women* several decades before Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*; Rokkeya Sakhawat Hossain projected a feminist utopia, with men confined to the zenanas, in her *Sultana’s Dream*. Women were very slowly but very definitely beginning to question the assumptions that had gone unchallenged all these centuries.

By the 20th century it was considered progressive among the upper and middle classes to educate their daughters, to marry their sons to educated girls. But, though schools and colleges were slowly becoming accessible to young girls and women, there was still hesitation on the part of the more traditional families to send their daughters to co-educational institutions. Thus, the convent schools run by various orders of nuns flourished. At the same time, we had, in Maharashtra (or the Bombay Presidency as it was known at the time), the first women’s university (SNDT University) set up by Acharya Karve, but there was no women’s college affiliated to the University of Bombay. It was to fill this gap that Archbishop Roberts invited a small group of English RSCJ to come out to India and set up a college for women.

The first RSCJ in India arriving in 1939 to take on the task of making higher education available to women, especially those who would not otherwise have had this opportunity, faced a number of challenges: a new country with its alien and complex socio-cultural milieu, the physical difficulties of adjusting to a different climate and strange new foods, the layered complexities of the political turmoil of the time (the Indian freedom struggle was at its peak), further compounded by the threatening war clouds that would burst soon after their arrival. Pioneers, with all the zeal of a Philippine, they faced each difficulty with courage and fortitude, launching their fledgling college, and ensuring that it grew into strength and independence. Slowly they took on other

challenges, setting up a school in Bangalore and another in the underprivileged rural area of Haregaon. Though the Bangalore mission closed down after some years, the Haregaon school expanded and flourished – even today it is instrumental in changing the lives of the girls in its charge.

In considering the importance of the contribution made by our pioneering first sisters, we need to remember both the story with which I began and the brief history of women’s education and empowerment in India that I have galloped through. In a country and a world that was shaped and stamped with patriarchal norms and perspectives, in which the Lakshman-rekha was deeply ingrained in the psyche of their students, they were striving to expand the horizons of these young women, and give them the knowledge and the skills that would ensure that they would have options in their lives. So many women of the upper and middle classes had no training that would equip them to face the world on their own, or offer them the possibility of economic independence. And without economic independence, what choices did they have? No matter what life dealt them, they would have to suffer in silence, since there was nothing they could do to change their situation. This became particularly noticeable during the Dowry Deaths of the 70s and the 80s – young women harassed, victimised, tortured and even killed because their parents could not meet the rapacious demands of their in-laws for dowries, stayed on in untenable situations because they literally had nowhere to go.

Even today, much of our work both at the educational level – through St. Theresa High School in Haregaon, New Dawn School in Torpa, Sophia College and Sophia Polytechnic in Mumbai – and in the field of development in the rural areas of Ahmednagar District and Jharkhand, is focussed on empowerment of women. Nor does the endeavour to empower women stop with equipping them with the skills to offer them economic independence. For it is not enough to have the skills and the knowledge – there has to be an attitudinal shift as well: one that can look at the world around with analytical and critical gaze. That can recognize the gap between the world as it is and the world as it could/should be. That can seek out the root causes of the injustices that cry out for redressal. That asks *why* and *why not* and will not be silenced. As the world has moved through the 70s, the 80s, the 90s and into the 21st century, this aspect of education has become ever more important: the challenge of inviting and encouraging young minds to dare to think differently and choose according to their own convictions, while, at the same time, helping them find their own foundational beliefs which will form the bedrock from which they will function.

And this is where the dilemma lies for us today. The Lakshman-rekhas of the past still haunt us, the frontiers we seek to push back are within the mind. All too often, the feisty confidence of our young students is perceived as a threat – to familial and social structures that depend on unquestioning acceptance of mores and behaviour patterns for the continuance of hallowed (sometimes oppressive) traditions. A threat which is countered in a variety of ways, ranging from rabid criticism and ostracism to violence, rape, even murder. I want the young women who leave our institutions to go out into the world with hope and courage and confidence, claiming all that the world should give them – and there is one part of me that cringes with fear, “No, no, stay safe, don’t take unnecessary risks, don’t invite trouble...” In other words, stay within the boundaries of the Lakshman-rekha.

There are many Lakshman-rekhas that our girls have to push back. Many come from privileged backgrounds that take for granted that they are entitled to their privileges, never questioning that these are based on the deprivations inflicted on others. Many come from homes where the patriarchal slant of the major religions is accepted as sacrosanct. For many, the different expectations for and from boys and girls within the same family is so much a way of being that it is not even noticed. Challenging some or all of these assumptions is dangerous in more ways than one, but unless one begins, no education could ever be transformative.

When the famous Delhi rape case took place in December 2012, followed a few months later by the rape of a young journalist in Mumbai, our students were shaken to the core. But I was never more proud of them. They held a meeting at which they talked openly about their own reactions and feelings, and from there, they went on to take positive steps to address the situation. They called their movement “Breaking the Culture of Silence”. They organised meetings with students of other colleges. They also felt that it was important to bring about some attitudinal transformation in children at a much younger age, and so they prepared gender-sensitisation modules suitable for students of ages 6 – 12, and actually went out to the neighbouring public schools to conduct these. They had confronted an impossible situation, and refused to let it be.

The values that we venerate in Philippine – the vision to look beyond the frontiers, the courage to let go of the familiar and the safe, the trust that will not be daunted by our ideas of success or failure, the love that stretches out to clasp hands across and beyond boundaries – these call us onwards. Her example is an inspiration that challenges us to seek out and push back the frontiers we impose upon ourselves. She calls us to subject our own assumptions to ruthless examination, and to encourage our students to do the same. Her vision still impels us onwards. Perhaps Louis MacNeice, in *Autumn Journal*, puts it best:

‘What is it we want really?
For what end and how?
If it is something feasible, obtainable,
Let us dream it now,
And pray for a possible land
Not of sleepwalkers, not of angry puppets,
But where both hand and brain can understand
The movements of our fellows;
Where life is an instrument and none
Is debarred [her] natural music,
Where the waters of life are free of the ice-blockade of hunger
And thought is as free as the sun,
Where the altars of sheer power and mere profit
Have fallen to disuse,
Where nobody sees the use
Of buying money and blood at the cost of blood and money,
Where the individual, no longer squandered
In self-assertion, works with the rest, endowed

With the split vision of a juggler and the quick lock of a taxi,
Where the people are more than a crowd.'

The frontiers are both 'out there' and 'deep within'. May the spirit of Philippine continue to inspire us as we strive to transcend them.

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Questions for discussion:

1. What are the frontiers and boundaries that confront us within our particular contexts, in our mission as educators?
2. Share something of the dilemmas and conflicts that we need to resolve in this mission, and some of the means we employ to do so.