

Introducing Women's Studies (Women's Studies Course)

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Inaugural Address By

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As a woman who was a full adult at the time of independence, a 'first generation beneficiary of the equality clauses of the Constitution' and a teacher of international politics for several years - I am extremely wary of the politics of Language and Memory, which have been speeded up by the current phase of globalization. The displacement of the Women's Question, by Gender, and Equity replacing Justice-Social-Economic and Political seek to blot out the history of values and ideology.

The Women's question, untouchability, the communal question were all Political Issues that needed resolution to give shape and reality to the vision of the free Indian nation as Equality, Justice and Freedom - assuring the dignity of the individual were vital values for the Indian Welfare State. The existence of the Non-aligned Movement and its vision of the New International Economic Order provided a historical backdrop for the International Women's Decade - and a far larger collective struggle by 3rd World Women to question the *Central Paradigm of Development from the two poles of Equality and Peace* (contributed by the 1st and 2nd World's Women).

Set in the context of a growing crisis, with increasing inequality, poverty and threats to people's rights, the CSWI's conclusion regarding "*increasing marginalization of the majority of women in the economy and society*" - reopened the Indian debate on the Women's Question. The renewed wave of the Women's Movement - armed with far better/ extensive information gathered meticulously by the groups hit by the twin crises of conscience and identity -- Academics, Bureaucrats and other Professionals, worked together promoting a 'knowledge explosion' regarding women's economic roles to rescue women from 'statistical invisibility'. Similar alliances developed in other parts of the 3rd World.

Lucille Mair, Secretary General of the Mid-Decade Review Conference (Copenhagen 1980) paid tributes to Indian Women's Studies scholars for their path breaking research on women's situation "*within the processes of structural change in the global economy which have implications for the working lives of women the world over*", and regretted third world women's lack of "control". According to the UN's World Survey (1985), women were 'stunningly absent' from all formal "*institutions/processes which internationally, nationally and locally determine priorities and allocate resources*".

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- Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi.

The Women's Decade enabled women in different lands to *engage collectively*, both in the politics of knowledge and memory and intervene at many levels from village and shanty towns to national and international planning and programming - which provided challenges to analytical concepts and *theories of development*, or '*growth and its creatures*'. By the 1980s, Development represented to women studies scholars a mess to be empirically analysed".

Crick and Watson's famous book "The Double Helix" made a profound statement "Everything in Nature come in *pairs*". Extending this analogy to Women's Studies - you get similar pairs in *conceptualizing Women in Society - Role(s) and Status, Production and Reproduction, Rights and Responsibilities, Visibility and Invisibility*. The problem arises when those responsible for formulating social policies and values - at national or international levels get so preoccupied with only one term of this equation that they tend to ignore or forget the complementary *Other*.

The CSWI's exercise revealed several aspects of such oversight. The Indian State and Academia were guilty of ignoring women's productive roles in all sectors of the economy and society - with consequent results. The Non-visibility of women's contributions and needs led to downgrading of their *rights and claims to a just share in national investment - for economic and social development*.

Instead, Indian planners had viewed women primarily as reproducers because they gave birth to children. Unfortunately the hypnosis prompted by nearly a century of the *Exploding Population* imagery emanating from global and national elites provided both propaganda and the rationales for this image-shift. The consequences identified by the CSWI - was the gender imbalance in India's population.

India's Sex Ratio : The CSWI had used the declining sex ratio as a major indicator of the long process of *marginalization of the majority of Indian women, and the failure of our state to live up to the Constitutional promises*.

In 1981 the Registrar General, Mr. Padmanabhan noted a slight upward tilt and announced with great jubilation, that the country had "crossed the hump", and women were no longer 'being done away with'. What he missed was the source of the upward tilt with increased life expectancy of older women. He also missed that the decline continued - possibly at a faster rate - among children. This was eventually caught by the Registrar General of the 1991 Census, Mr. A.R. Nanda - who *thought it wiser to persuade the GOI into a less harsh and more child-friendly Population Policy*. But half a century of projecting the population 'explosion' phenomenon as the greatest enemy of development - had created a legitimacy and a mind set among the affluent sections - including planners and the party that came into power in the decade of globalization and neo-liberalisation. I quote from a recent paper* by Mr. Nanda who is a far greater scholar in population studies and staunch ally of the CWDS and women's studies in India.

"The general relationship among eugenics, demography, and population control in the last one hundred years centered round the politics of population growth. Institutionalization of linkage internationally ensued in 1900, when the first in a series of international population conferences started. As the international

movement for birth/population control began soon after the 1st World War, population scientists (Le. economists, eugenists, demographers, geneticists doctors and sociologists) *liked to take political positions, while attempting to make the study of populations a true science. For most of them, it was all about" control" .*

...Stoddard, who referred to "*overcrowded colored homelands from where would come the outward thrust of surplus colored men*" (1920). He blamed the white men as "responsible for their own demise, since they had reduced famine and disease and had thus *removed checks to population increase among non-whites....* "

...Economists like Harold Wright warned that population trends "may, if they are not modified, *destroy western civilisation in a few years*" and urged for " *a world policy in regard to population problems*" (Wright, 1923).

Demographers, Carr-Saunders (1926) Cox (1926) and Blacker (1926), held the same phobia of "Yellow peril" behind their plea for population control. This was at a time when the population growth rates in Japan, India and other countries in Asia and Africa were less compared to those in the countries of Europe. East, in his book ' *Mankind at the Crossroads*', claimed that " *English brains have made a new India in 50 years. Famine-stricken, pestilence-smitten, cobra-bittern India has been given a new lease of life ... "India started being a 'focus of international birth control efforts" from the 1920s and '30s.*

The tendency to go for a policy of "compulsory birth control" *persisted from 1927 World Population Conference at Geneva through the discussion in later conferences in the decades of 1930s, '50s, '60s and '70s. The tendency for such coercive policy and strategy was reflected in China going for 'one-child policy' from 1979, and in India during 1976-77. It is well realized by now that such tendency smack of an alarmist, racist and over-simplistic view of a complex personal and societal issue which needs to be perceived with utmost circumspection, care and empathy.*

In India, it was Radhakamal Mukherjee who convened the first Indian Population Conference in Lucknow in 1936. He also headed the sub-committee on population of the "National Planning Committee" of the Indian National Congress in the 1930s .

... .In the 1950s and '60s, U.S. Government was persuaded by population activists to assert leadership over the international campaign..... *The international politics of population took on a confrontational turn. Professor W. Brand's report on the world population problem "skillfully utilized a scientific cloak to faithfully serve the aggressive policy of the imperialists in the international conference on Population Problems in 1959. A Neo-Malthusian twist was given to the issue by arguing that backwardness, poverty, unemployment and all other hardships in poor countries were only due to "over population", and hence, birth must be controlled first .*

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- Excerpts from the George B. Simmons Memorial Oration delivered by Mr. A.R. Nanda, (Executive Director, Population Foundation of India, New Delhi), and published in Demography India, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2004), titled "Obsolescence and Anachronism of Population Control: From Demography to Demology.

.....The Club of Rome" Report, 1972 (Limits to Growth), and even the "Global 2000 Report to the President, 1980" in USA continued the Neo-Malthusian stance. Only a minority of international scholars opposed this argument as showing a lack of respect for the capacity of people who are poor and have had less education, to cope, and may therefore worry that they won't be able to handle their problems in their parts of the world".

The sex - ratio debate in India has been transformed over the last three decades, thanks to the intellectual honesty of our Registrar - Generals, and pressure from the twin movements of Women and Women's Studies, supported by the research of a few health scientists (Imrana Quadeer, Mohan Rao etc.). They have realised that the decline has now shifted to younger age-groups - thanks to the availability of biotechnologies for sex-selective foeticide before birth.

I conclude with the observations of one of the activists who has fought for the Rights of Children at national and global levels for several years. Razia Ismail observes on the results of the Census of 2001:

"The 2001 Census results are a damning indictment of the social valuation of the girl child. The slide in the girl's percentage share of the youngest age cohort is now chronic. So is the government's continuing failure to analyse, address, and stem the decline. Today, the numbers of girl children are at an all time low. Data on the 6 to 18 year age group shows that the fallout of lost births and early deaths has moved to a second level of depletion. The ' shock' figure of the 2001 Census is not the 927 females per 1000 males ratio of the 0-6 years group, but the 858 females per 1000 males of the 15-19 years cohort. Focussing on hopes for women who have survived early disposal, the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women fails to see where justice for the female Indian must begin: before her birth. This is a root problem that has to be confronted".

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- India Social Development Report, 2006, Council for Social Development & OUP, New Delhi, 2006.