

Women's Studies Course

Lecture By

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Independent India attached great significance **to the role of education** - to achieve the constitutional promises of Justice - social, economic and political: Equality - assuring the dignity of the individual; and Freedom - of thought and action.

The belief in the critical role of Education to bring about changes in the status of women, however go back much earlier in our history. Historians of ancient India and progressive social reformers of modern India vied with each other in elaborating this connection - identifying particular periods that registered positive or negative trends. And - as in the cases of all social sciences - the politics of language and the politics of memory played major roles in all such analysis. **One of the critical tasks facing Women's Studies is to counter these twin processes, so that women's present and future status and roles are not jeopardised.**

Women's Studies is of course not the same as women's education. Its history is much shorter, as it came into existence only during the last quarter of the 20th century in India - as one of the manifestations of the renewed wave of the Women's Movement in which women in academia played a leadership role. In earlier periods of our history the struggle for women's right to education was led mainly by men - **to reform Indian society.**

There is an active propaganda that decries Women's Studies in India as being 'foreign - inspired'. Such propagandists point to the Feminist Movement in the Western world during the 1960s as the source of this 'inspiration'. While it is true that some feminist literature from the West did reach India by the early '70s - it would be a-historical for us to ignore the massive evidence of Women's Writing in India going right back to several centuries before the Christian Era - recovered by our literary scholars in the 2 volumes edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. In their introduction to the second volume the two editors argue that unlike Betty Friedan's **Feminine Mystique**, viewed by many as 'the book' that set off the Feminist Movement in the West, **Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI)** was different in its content approach and 'the constituency that it served'.

The CSWI had been constituted by the Government of India in the context of the International Women's Decade (1975-85). At its inception - the Decade's goals were also identified - as Equality, Development and Peace. The few of us who served on that Committee as members were briefed by our seniors (all members of the generation which participated in India's Freedom Movement) that we should not get misled by Western ideas, or **literature but concentrate on gathering evidence from the soil of India - giving priority to the poorest and least 'visible' sections of Indian women.** However irksome this self-denying choice may have appeared to some people - I can say

unhesitatingly that its **'transformative'** impact on all of us was far greater in the long run. The research exercise - in the field, talking to 10000+ women - in urban and rural areas across classes, occupations and levels of education, along with the available information pooled together by the Task Forces constituted by the Committee - bringing in eminent social scientists from varied disciplines - **transformed all our lives, pushing us into activism in support of the poor majority of India's women** - who had not benefited from the constitutional promises. Instead, most of them had become victims of the **development process**, which had ignored their real needs and demands.

The United Nations, born out of the shambles and destruction caused by the two World Wars, and the threat of enhanced powers of mass-destruction, put-forth three major concepts in the hope of building a new world order, so that such devastations could be avoided in future. These were a) human rights; b) the equality of all nations as members of the General Assembly; and c) development for all peoples irrespective of race, class, caste and gender. According to historians of the 20th century. the process of decolonisation - enlarging the membership of the General Assembly - and the periodic debates, dialogues and other activities to make the concepts of human rights and development more meaningful and real in the context of the unequal world that we live in represent the most important achievements of the UN.

The greatest controversy has been on the notion of development. While no-one questions that economic growth is essential, critics have all along questioned **the absolute primacy of the economic dimension of development, neglecting its social, political and cultural aspects**. Rather belatedly, the United Nations convened the first World Summit for Social Development in 1995 to make-up for this failure.

The document that emerged from the Summit - the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development - mentions many keywords and phrases - eradication of "poverty, unemployment and social exclusion", "democracy and transparent and accountable governance", social justice and equity, people-centred development, "empowerment of the poor and of women", "peace and security" and "respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms." The only attempt to define social development states that:

"throughout the world. all men and women, especially those living in poverty may exercise the rights, utilise the resources and share the responsibilities that enable them to lead satisfying lives and to contribute to the well-being of their communities and humankind".

Significantly enough the Summit's assessment of the contemporary social situation emphasises - **the glaring contradiction between expansion of prosperity and expansion of unspeakable poverty - i.e. the failure of single-minded pursuit of economic growth which enhances inequality within and between nations**. It also admits that this growing inequality and contradiction has been accelerated by the **"global transformation of the world economy which are profoundly changing the parameters of social developments in all countries"**.

The final document is substantially different from the earlier drafts prepared by the UN Secretariat. At a meeting convened by the then Deputy Chairman of the Planning

Commission, Sh. Pranab Mukherjee to discuss the first draft, many of us raised strong objections to the **racist and imperialist tone of the document**. I also raised the question **why the role of educational institutions and systems had been altogether omitted and pleaded that a meeting should be convened to obtain the advice of educationists, particularly those within the university system**. This was not accepted. **but the Indian delegation at the preparatory meetings pressed for and obtained a special commitment on "universal and equitable access to quality education .. , making particular efforts to rectify inequalities relating to social conditions; ... to strengthen the role of culture in development and contributing to full development of human resources and to social development"**.

We would also claim some credit for specific references to the crucial role of universities and other institutions of higher education within the Programme of Action by persuading the Indian delegation to incorporate particular amendments for this purpose. I still find the document unsatisfactory, because it continues to **undervalue the reality that generation and promotion of values essential for social and human development are amongst the basic functions of the educational process**. As a student of international and national politics over the last five decades, I have been a powerless, but not non-vocal observer of the increasing marginalisation of educational institutions in such dialogues, debates and policy formulation at both international and national levels.

The goals of social development were indicated in our Constitution - in the preamble and the directive principles of state policy, apart from the section on fundamental rights. **The Constitution recognised the existence of historically institutionalised inequalities in our society and built-in specific provisions to correct them so that India could become a genuine democracy**. The protective clauses for the removal of social, political, educational and economic inequalities of members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the specific mandate on the state not to discriminate on grounds of sex, caste or creed, and empowerment of the state to adopt special measures for the protection of women and children are some of the examples of this ideology.

The role of universities in India's national development was addressed very forthrightly by the Indian Education Commission (1964-66). Starting from the premise that the Indian education system must aim to develop a **secular, socialist and democratic society**, the Commission went on to record certain special responsibilities of Indian universities - **in sharp rejection of the post-second World War theory of academic neutrality being propagated from transatlantic sources at that time**.

"First and foremost, they must learn to strive to serve as the 'conscience of the nation', as assessors of the national way of life. This responsibility becomes all the greater in the absence of an enlightened public opinion. There are so many new pulls and forces (as well as old ones) operating in our national life - as, indeed, in the life of man as a whole - that its balance has become very precarious: and there is a danger of losing our bearings unless universities are able to play this role adequately by involving themselves deeply in the study and evaluation of the social process. Such involvement is vital since the universities are preeminently the forum for a critical assessment of society - sympathetic, objective, unafraid - whose partiality and motives cannot be suspected.

A university's business is not primarily to give society what it wants but what it needs and obviously they are not identical. It is not a 'community service station' passively responding to popular demand and thereby endangering its intellectual integrity. Nor is it an ivory tower into which students and teachers can withdraw for a time for teaching or research, accepting no responsibility for the improvement of society. It must always be in a constant state of creative tension - knowing where to interpret, where to criticise, where to pioneer, and where to support traditional values. **It must encourage in its students and also in the general public free and disinterested thinking which challenge vested interests and established ways."**

Written 50 years ago these messages are even more critical for the university community in today's context - when the accelerated process of social transformation, the propaganda and myths about globalisation, ideas of 'the end of history and ideology' threaten the basic role of universities - to develop young minds to think and act critically and creatively, to participate actively to achieve genuine social development.

I have inflicted this long quotation on you because I do not share the current ideas about the end of history or ideology. I have taken great pride that the freedom generation generated such ideas in our academic institutions, and left many of us with the persistent faith in the capacities of our young people to translate this vision into reality.

The same faith helped some of us to launch a movement for women's studies and fight for its incorporation within the university system when the National Policy on Education was being formulated. In 1985 the Indian Association for Women's Studies, in collaboration with the University Grants Commission and leading thinkers from the university system mounted pressure on the Education Ministry, the outcome of which was the small section within the policy statement titled Education for Equality. The Policy did not include all that we had suggested, but I can assure you that, **but for the intervention of the women's movement, the words 'equality' and 'empowerment' would not have featured in the National Policy at all. The increasing trend in recent years among policy makers at the national and global level has been to regard education only as a marketable commodity in which promotion of values is considered irrelevant.**

Value education, human rights education and more recently the term 'empowerment' especially in the context of women have become part of the rhetoric and universities are expected to treat them at par with population and environmental education - as separate subjects for study. not as dimensions of critical and creative assessment. Yet each of these have thrown up complex issues in social development of which our generation had been totally unaware.

Developments in science and technology, the accelerated phase of globalisation, the weakening of the nation state system - the theories of 'withdrawal of the state' determine some current intellectual modes, which try to negate any faith in universal human and social values, and the all pervasive influence of the market in every sphere of our lives - subject our young people to multiple pressures which were absent for most of us. **It is in**

this context that the role of universities becomes even more critical and crucial than ever before.

Reports of increasing number of adolescent suicides - because they cannot cope with the pressures of competition and parental aspirations in educational achievement are grim signals of what is going wrong with our social development. Female infanticides in communities and regions with no early history of such practices are similar signals.

Recent studies on juvenile sex ratios in different regions and social groups suggests that both female infanticide and female foeticide - following sex determination tests - are spreading to new regions. It also raises a value question. The census data clearly indicates that it is only our tribal communities who have so far escaped these trends - since the juvenile sex ratio among them is the most balanced in the country. **Who then should we assess as more backward in terms of social development?**

Years back Prof. M.N. Srinivas agreed with me that our educational system, instead of promoting the values contained in the Constitution, had become the most powerful instrument of the sanskritisation process. Engagement in action research with poor peasant women - including large groups of tribal women - has helped me to realise that the sanskritisation process can be countered through a policy of partnership between higher education institutions and such groups.

Our inherited, established social values perpetuated a social, economic and political hierarchy through a powerful, institutionalized system of social exclusion, and monopolies of economic, political and knowledge power. Today that hierarchy is global - and we have again become passive recipients of knowledge and political and economic doctrines emanating from regions and institutions which pay only lip service to the principles and concepts developed by the UN system. It is time for our universities to pick up the challenge and re-establish a two-way dialogue, not only with ideology but with concrete research backed data for new perspectives on social development.

During the International Women's Decade, the three sub-themes - Equality, Development and Peace - created problems for scholars engaged in evaluation research, especially in the third World. For them the first and the last terms were too abstract - too far removed from the realities they were seeking to study. An Indian delegate (Prof. Alu Dastoor) to the Un Commission on the Status of Women proposed Employment, Health and Education as alternatives. Lucille Mair, Secretary General for the Review Conference (Copenhagen, 1980) complimented us for these concrete terms, as it made her task more meaningful. We were in fact trying to **humanise** the language of the whole debate - in order to by-pass the politics.

And, since Third World women were responsible for attacking the existing paradigm of Development - which had promoted more poverty, invisibility and exclusion for millions of women in the third world the term Development required opening up, from the perspectives of poor women who had been victims of the development process.

The major responsibility for women's studies in this historical context - was to provide a perspective - to transform the production and dissemination of knowledge across the

educational system. I must however admit that we made an error in restricting its boundaries to Humanities and Social Sciences (genetics especially) and biotechnology have forced practitioners of women's studies to increasingly realise the need to extend our boundaries. This realization has forced the UGC's Standing Committee on Women's Studies to undertake a National Consultation on this needed interface. This will take place in JNU later this year. Hopefully the participants will not ignore the consequences that these developments have produced - propelled by global propaganda on population (that I referred to in my inaugural address) on the changing dimension of the Sex-Ratio, and a new form of gender-imbalance, nationally and globally.