

Women's Studies Course

Inaugural Address

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The best way to examine the evolution and expansion of Women's Studies in India is to locate it within three contexts : (a) Historical; (b) ideological; and (c) methodological.

The Historical Scenario was set by the decision of the Un General Assembly to declare 1975-85 as the International Women's Decade: with the three slogans - of Equality, Development and Peace. The three slogans provided a broad ideological approach, but not necessarily a methodology. Secondly, **they were goals being set for the Member States of the United Nations, not necessarily the nations, or the peoples.** For students of global politics - it was an open secret that the three abstractions were born out of the politics of the Cold War - and represented objectives selected by the three major formations in the world of the seventies (i) the rich nations of the Western World; (ii) the poverty-stricken young nations born out of dissolved Empires - of the West and the East; and © the Soviet Union - facing possible extinction by Atom Bombs, or internal rifts. As one of the leaders of the Non-aligned Movement - India certainly belonged to the second of these three blocs, and despite the highlighted aims of the State spelt out in the Preamble to its Constitution, gender equality - or access to development had remained only dreams - for the large masses of Indian women. They had, however, demonstrated in successive elections - how much they valued this new right.

Despite the fact that India was being ruled under the leadership of one of the toughest, and most powerful women thrown up by the 20th century, the UN's call for member nations to submit Reports on Women's Status had gone ignored till 1971 - when a Committee was constituted somewhat casually. Dr. Phulrenu Guha , who as Minister for Social Welfare had proposed the constitution of such a Committee several years earlier - was given the responsibility for producing the report, but little say - in the selection of her colleagues, and still less authority to organise the needed investigation. The first term of 2 years ended with

virtually no work done. Rather than seek a 2nd term she chose to resign with several of her colleagues.

Fortunately for India's women, the rescue bid was mounted by two men - Nurul Hassan, then the Minister for Education and Social Welfare and J.P. Naik, Member Secretary of the ICSSR. The Committee was reconstituted with a new Member Secretary, and given an extension of 1 year, to produce a Report in time for the 1st World Conference on Women in Mexico (1975). By involving a large number of leading social scientists in the needed research - while members of the Committee toured the country talking to 10000+ women - of different classes and backgrounds and then by working round the clock for the last two months, the CSWI managed to submit its Report *Towards Equality* - to the GOI on the 1st January 1975, a few months before the declaration of National Emergency, by Indira Gandhi.

Women's Studies was born in India from this historic exercise. Since the researchers involved by the Committee were all social scientists with more men than women - these became features of the Women's Studies movement in the early years, and social sciences determined its methodological parameters.

Ideologically, the movement adopted a radical stance - with a combination of Gandhian nationalism and a broad left orientation - to focus attention on the majority of India's women in rural and urban areas - whose needs had remained virtually invisible to development planners, policy makers and scholars till then.

Policy changes - to accommodate Women's Studies within the complex structures of Educational Institutions were eventually adopted in the 1980s - but only after an organised demand by its practitioners who created the Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS) in 1981. The UGC's programme followed soon thereafter and policy support was extended by the National Educational Policy (1986).

The Political and economic changes at the national level during the 1990s also affected the status progress of Women's Studies. In 2004, after another historic change of Government at the National level, the Education Minister wanted some of us to explain "the nature of the threat" that Women's Studies had faced from the previous government. Rather than give our own, limited answers, we thought it best to obtain the collective view through 6 regional and one national consultations. After examining the recommendations of these gatherings, the UGC's Standing Committee on Women's Studies has issued a new Perspective Paper. I summarise some of its major conclusions and recommendation:

An overview of the achievements of Women's Studies in India during the last quarter of a century indicates that **recovery and translations of lost writings by women in different languages has been one of the most positive outcomes of this movement.** Women's Studies scholarship has recovered texts dating back to the ancient period, which provide extraordinary source material for not only literature scholars, but for students of intellectual, cultural and regional history. These volumes were followed by a flood of more such recoveries in different regions and inspiring scholars to engage in active research and publication of alternative accounts of classics, and epics in ancient and medieval history. In the last few decades, several oral narratives of women in the peasant, tribal and dalit struggles have been documented, giving new insights into the history of modern India. However, we would like to record our sense of acute apprehension, *that inadequate development of the discipline of Comparative Literature* in India prevents adequate assessment of the value of such recoveries.

We now realise how imperative it is to move beyond these limits - to engage with science and technology with particular reference to reproductive technologies, genetic sciences, agriculture, medicine and other disciplines.

Women's studies scholars have made apparent that gender inequality is not a function only of retrograde tradition but that gender bias is also reproduced in modern institutions. Similarly, inequalities based on caste and community are also reproduced in modern institutions and ideologies like law, university research and courses.

Over the last two decades women's studies in India had raised important questions about the invisibility, distortion and marginalization of gender as a category of analysis in mainstream disciplines and their canonisation. **Despite the feminist critiques of mainstream social sciences, the classical frameworks of caste have cast their shadow in women's studies too. Women's studies need now to seriously engage with the specificities of caste and community in gender issues. Women's studies need to be seen in the wider context of common democratic struggles, of linking women's rights to the rights of other marginalized groups.**

Women's studies must interrogate the much publicised approaches that view caste and communities as frozen in time and recognize the agency of women of dalit, tribal and minority communities. Women's studies must connect the diverse and complex lived experience of different groups of women with critiques of disciplinary knowledges and academe. This is a vast and challenging territory that has tremendous

implications for the way in which curricula are designed and for setting the research agenda as well.

There is an emerging discipline – Film Studies, active collaboration with which, in our view, will benefit Women’s Studies.

In the 21st century, WS has to grapple with demographic dynamics as the most fundamental challenge facing not only India or South Asia but the World as a whole.

Women’s studies centres/departments need to reclaim a social space to set the grammar of discourse on women in the country. This would be possible only through interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and research. We have some excellent building blocks available on how an interdisciplinary approach can be adopted. It maybe pertinent to recall that **Law is perhaps one of the earliest disciplines of an interdisciplinary nature, and in India it was the legal field that showed how research and teaching, policy formulation and field based action could be organically linked to further the cause of women. Legal scholars contributed to production of teaching material, arguments for policy intervention and extension of legal literacy. There is much to learn from these efforts.**

The emergence of the International Conventions on Human Rights, Women’s Rights and Child Rights have increased the importance of legal studies for specialists as well as for general education. In the coming years, while we hope to promote interaction with developing scientific and professional fields, we cannot lose WS’ earlier strength in the legal aspects of social existence.

In addition, the new thrust areas such as developing a feminist dictionary in Indian languages, promoting research and teaching of gender and science and technology, comparative literature and history to reaffirm the multilingual and multicultural history of India, all need support and attention . **Now more than ever the WSCs and the UGC can play a key role in bringing the voice of women to bear on what is happening in the country.**
