

XI National Conference on Women's Studies

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PLENARY ON WOMEN'S STUDIES

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When Kumud Sharma informed me that I **must** speak at this particular plenary, I had different ideas in my mind. **But the context has changed suddenly with the UGC's decision – asking me to chair a new Standing Committee to review the present state of Women's Studies in India, and presumably to offer suggestions for the future**, a task that should, rightly be taken up by some of you. However, I propose to use this opportunity to enable ourselves on the Committee to learn from your experiences – of problems and achievements, and above all your vision for the future.

By historical necessity and ideological rationale, women's studies is essentially interventionist change-oriented and non-neutral. I question two widely prevalent perceptions of women's studies in India, that - (a) it is essentially an exotic import from the west; or (b) it is something which has become necessary in the context of globalisation, because 'gender sensitisation' is necessary to be 'politically correct' in today's world. Instead, I contend that women's studies draws its roots from the *Indian debate on the role of universities and education as a whole, going back at least to the Kothari commission, if not earlier, and has followed an unique path of interaction between the educational system and the women's studies movement*. My own compulsion, for instance, did not spring from any foreign source or feminist preoccupations, nor any experience of discrimination on the ground of being a woman, but from frustrations as a university teacher in the first two decades after Independence, which drove me into the University Grants Commission around the time before the submission of the Kothari Commission Report - to be actively involved in the forthcoming possibility of reforms.

Affirming that the rapidity of changes in the contemporary world are forcing 'profound changes' on universities, the Kothari Commission reaffirmed some old values of higher education - "to strive to promote equality and social justice and to foster through teachers and students the attitudes and values needed to develop the good life in individuals and society", adding some special responsibilities for Indian universities, to serve : -

- 'as the conscience of the nation',
- 'as assessors of the national way of life'

"So far the Indian universities have not performed this function adequately ..due either to apathy or failure to recognise the importance, or to the traditional belief that scholarship and academic excellence thrive only in isolation from the clamour of the multitude, or an apprehension of the

displeasure of the authorities or influential vested interests". (Education and National Development, Government of India, 1966).

I consider the Kothari Report a valuable document in social history, because despite many inconsistencies, it does contain wide ranging evidence of innumerable socio-political debates which characterised the academic world of post-Independence India. *The kind of values reaffirmed in the report were actually in total opposition to what was becoming the dominant mainstream concept of 'academic neutrality' being disseminated from across the Atlantic and Pacific* to higher education systems throughout the world. The notion of neutrality depended heavily on two strategies and concepts :- (a) increasing specialisation and fragmentation of knowledge by disciplinary boundaries, which constantly increased in number; and (b) the concepts of 'development' and the 'tradition-modernity' framework, offered as given boundaries of academic enquiry, especially in the humanities and social sciences.

Despite the heritage of 'boundary maintenance', hierarchy and authoritarianism inherited from our social system, Indian academics - with memories of the struggle against colonialism and its intellectual ideology - and excitement about the democratic experiment of New India - continued to resist these strategies and concepts. The constrictions of fragmentation of disciplines gave rise to *a search for interdisciplinary areas and approaches* - in social studies and the natural sciences, and found considerable support from the University Grants Commission. As a member of the UGC Secretariat during the late 60s and early seventies, I had the good fortune of many discussions with DSK and leading educationists of the time, deepening my own conviction *that no one had the right to deny an interventionist, participatory and activist role to universities to define and expand the areas of its intellectual and developmental concerns*. The social churning unleashed by the Republic found its reflection within academia too, but the institutional framework, like other structures in our social system, remained resistant.

The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India depended heavily on supportive research and analysis provided by a strong group of social scientists who belonged to this category of dissenters. They were later to support the CSWI's challenge to the educational system. Most recommendations of the Kothari Report found little policy or resource support from the Government, but individuals within institutions continued their struggles for reforms through experiments in teaching methods and media, democratisation of university administration and attempting to breach disciplinary and institutional boundaries which encourage fragmentation of knowledge and institutional isolation. *The activist role however continued to invite displeasure of the authorities, a reaction accelerated during the National Emergency*.

Few are aware that Women's Studies in India (as we know it today) was born as a direct response, to the declaration of Emergency in June '75. The CSWI's appeal to social scientists to remedy their earlier neglect was only 6 months old, and the full Report, released in May, had still not reached even those who contributed to the investigation. The ICSSR sponsored Summary was to reach a somewhat larger group - but only during the Emergency. A grim-faced J.P. Naik, facing the collapse of Freedom for which he and others had fought for decades - decided to gamble on a sponsored research programme targetting poor, marginalised and 'invisible' women, in the hope that "its political implications would not be realised by the powers that be, at least not immediately". He knew that the ICSSR would not be allowed to "do much else". A hand-picked, interdisciplinary Advisory Committee, (all members being known opponents of the Emergency, including a few of the 'outraged' members of the CSWI) quietly initiated a number of studies - even entrusting some to scholars who were officially 'underground' - or evading arrest.

The explosion of people's anger and the reaffirmation of democratic values in the post-Emergency period coincided with the new assertion of the women's movement and the transformation of women's studies from quiet investigations into hitherto neglected sectors of women's lives and experiences into a public debate. Most people in India have viewed women's studies as the intellectual arm of the women's movement. *My contention is that it was also a continuation of the interventionist view of education, which, inspite of considerable official resistance found ultimately a little space in the National Policy on Education of 1986.*

The first National Conference on Women's Studies (Bombay 1981) observed that in order to develop objective consciousness about women's inequality and problems, to influence attitudes and to strengthen the data base for better analysis and more effective policies:-

“higher educational institutions had to assume some responsibility and accept women's studies as a serious area for academic concern. The large number of students - both men and women - who pass through the universities need to receive sustained, continuous exposure to women's issues and women's roles in society through teaching and research. Neither sporadic research nor occasional media coverage could be a substitute to this. In order to obtain a better insight and understanding of the position of women in its historical and contemporary context, it is necessary that women's studies becomes a part of the curriculum”.

Recognising the validity and significance of these challenges for academic as well as social development, the UGC addressed Universities in 1982 to consider appropriate ways of incorporating women's issues in their teaching, research and extension activities. The National Workshop sponsored by the UGC in Delhi (1985) carried the dialogue further. Participants in the workshop - some vice-chancellors and senior academics - men and women - observed that introduction of women's issues as an integral part of the curricula of different disciplines would fulfill both 'academic and social' objectives. The social objectives - of value change - have been mentioned earlier. The academic objectives were :-

- i. to revitalise university education;
- ii. to update curricula by incorporating the results of scholarship, as they challenge some established theories, analytical concepts and methodologies of various disciplines;
- iii. to promote interdisciplinary collaboration in teaching, curriculum designing, research and extension activities since women's studies are interdisciplinary by nature;
- iv. to generate new and organic knowledge through intensive field work - which would help generate data for better evaluation, and correction of development policies/programmes and in extending academic analysis into neglected sectors;
- v. to promote closer involvement of universities in action to assist women at grassroots through extension activities and;
- vi. to contribute to the global debate on the women's question through rediscovery of the debate in Indian literature.

Soon after the First National Conference on Women's Studies (Bombay, 1981), a group of women's studies practitioners in India defined it as “the pursuit of a more comprehensive, critical and balanced understanding of social reality. Its essential components include (i) women's

contribution to the social process; (ii) women's perception of their own lives; (iii) roots and structures of inequality that lead to marginalisation, invisibility and exclusion of women from the scope, approaches and conceptual framework of most intellectual enquiry and social action. Women's studies should, thus, not be narrowly defined as studies about women or information about women, but be viewed as a critical instrument for social and academic development".

Being primarily a student of history – I always spend too much time on the past. But what we in the Committee need from all of you is information based on your experience, plus your vision of the way forward.

Since the UGC did not think of giving us any Terms of Reference, I have tentatively drafted 5 which occurred to me, which I am placing before you, as well as my colleagues on the Committee – whom I did not have the opportunity or time to consult.

1. To review the original aims/objectives of Women's Studies in India in relation to (a) the Higher Education System; (b) National Policy on Education – as defined by various documents of Government of India and its agencies/communities.
2. Problems/issues in institutionalization/resources and identities within universities, research institutions – roles of UGC, ICSSR, ICAR, ICMR and other similar bodies created by GOI.
3. Challenges posed by developments within Sciences/Technology – missing in earlier conceptualization of Women's Studies.
4. Challenges from NGOisation – increasing dependence on external funding agendas/concepts/theories, shifting from roots in dynamics of Indian society and emerging issues.
5. Role of various networks like IAWS – and their problems/potential.

My request to all of you is to keep them in mind in organizing your responses, adding further ideas from your experiences.

I conclude by reminding you of your great heritage. The Ist National Conference is where we began this collective journey – A quarter of a century later, I am appealing to all of you – to enable this Committee to do its job in a worthwhile manner. Give us the material and your directions.

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