

GENDER AND SOCIETY

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Vivekananda College-CIE-DU Seminar

Key Note Address

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Let me first congratulate the Vivekananda College and the Central Institute of Education for convening this seminar. I am particularly happy that the initiative was taken by Teachers associated with the B.El.Ed. Course. As a nominated member of the Faculty of Education of Delhi University, I have admired the courage and faith of its designers and practitioners to make school teaching so attractive to college students. Decades ago, I was associated with the University Grants Commission's high-powered Committee on Teacher Education, entrusted with the task of promoting the Kothari Commission's recommendation that interdisciplinary Schools of Education should play a leading role to enliven school teaching with much more inputs from multidisciplinary research on social dynamics as well as on teaching methodology. My experience was an exposure to the resistance power of entrenched structures and disciplines within the higher education system. In my discussions with Prof. D.S. Kothari I could not help designating it as 'the new caste system'. May I congratulate the colleges teaching this course currently, and the CIE again for giving reality to DSK's and JP Naik's old dream, especially as I hear that students enjoy the course, and have no problems finding employment thereafter. What more could be hoped from a vocationally oriented course, especially when the ultimate beneficiaries represent the future hopes for a responsible, engaged and creative India?

Being a student of politics by instinct and a social scientist by profession, I have become rather apprehensive about the politics of language. In the 1970s we initiated debates at various levels about trends of change in women's status, and struggled for changes in the educational process – to reflect the diversity of these trends for the diverse groups – cultures, communities, classes – that make up India's population. The Committee on the Status of Women's exercise had exposed to us – the educated professionals – *our own appalling ignorance of this diversity.*

The replacement of women by the term Gender about the same time that we were also hit by *globalisation* (in its current phase) alerts my wariness of the politics of language. But university education is expected to be in touch with current developments. *So all that I shall do is to warn you of the possible dangers – of changing words with human connotations/meanings for abstract or relational constructs – which do not give rise to human images in your (or the students') mind when you use them.* Nor do they stir your

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emotion and innate sense of justice or humanity even your common sense or critical faculty.

The best example of this process of whipping up a blind sense of fear blunting out all other emotions or rationality is the impact of *the displacement of 'people', by the non-human, rather frightening term 'population'*, on the thinking, reasoning and behaviour of the educated classes in our country – a contribution from four decades of the 'population explosion' debate.

I am sorry to introduce this unpleasant theme at this stage of the Seminar, but since half of your discussion today is on what is happening to the girl child in India – I have to tell you that the socio-political and ideological context as well the as rationale has been created by the same debate. The first warning received by national women's organisations in Delhi was in 1982 when an advertisement of Bhandari's Clinic, Amritsar stated "*The birth of a daughter these days is a threat to the family and the nation*". Within a few years – the President of the Federation of Obstetrics and Gynaecologists of India – a woman doctor – could say in an open Conference – "Our first responsibility is to control population growth" *How did this become the responsibility of doctors? Who provided the impulse or the legitimacy? Why are we facing an increasingly less proportion of girls within successive generation of children born during the last several decades – what demographers call an 'adverse sex-ratio at birth? What are the social consequences that these children face when they are grown up enough to seek partners in life, or to have children? I am old enough to be their grandmother – but I think the students here have the right and the responsibility to ask these questions – because they are members of the affected generation.*

I would also hope that they would examine the Social Construction of Gender from a multi-dimensional perspective, relating their own personal and generational experiences to what the academics have to share with them. I am sure it would enrich the discussion for all present, and raise even more questions than can be answered today. I will provide two to start with. Does India have any *one* Social Construction of Gender. Second, does our history – past or contemporary – find this construction permanent, or static, even from one generation to the next, for the same group?

Some people present here may think I am preaching rebellion to the younger participants. Let me assure them that I am only doing what I have learnt to value most from my life-long association with the educational process. I have had many teachers in different ages, and in different contexts. Some were very highly academically qualified, some were not so – but had experiential skills, knowledge and wisdom - which I did not have. My mother, who never saw the inside of a school, but educated herself - taught me to venerate education as a value in itself, and the meaning of responsibility – personal, familial and social. One teacher at the University level told me "it is ridiculous to believe that anyone of us can teach an undergraduate everything. *If I can teach my students how to teach themselves, then I shall consider I have done a good job*". My own students – in two different Universities and states of India, told me they knew what they had to do to clear the examinations, but I should continue to teach the way I was doing – because they 'enjoyed' it.

Prof. D.S. Kothari, with whom I came to work when I was nearly 40 – taught me that all universities, but Indian Universities especially – “must function as the conscience of the nation” – because the processes of change in India were too complex, turbulent and full of contradictions. It was too easy for people to lose their bearings, values and sense of responsibilities – social, human and political. Prof. J.P. Naik – another *guru* with whom I worked - taught me that academic responsibility did not end with analysis or knowledge generation. As citizens of a democracy, we had moral and political responsibilities – “to break the three monopolies by which Indian society has preserved its hierarchic structure through thousands of years – the monopolies of wealth, power and knowledge”. Interestingly, none of these persons ever made me feel handicapped or self-conscious because of being a woman, even though in my two teaching jobs and in the UGC I was the first woman to join at a teaching or officer’s level.

My last set of teachers have been the unlettered, poor labouring women in different corners of India. Peasant women in rural areas taught me to value *the preciousness of our natural environmental resources* – water, soil and forests – and the threats that we, the educated, had exposed them to. Once they had realised that I valued the knowledge they had – it became a relationship of sharing different types of knowledge between equals.

No one had bothered to teach these women that as India’s citizens they had any rights. When Prof. Lotika Sarkar spent a whole week telling them of their basic rights under the Constitution – they told her in a chorus –“Now that we know we have so many rights, our spines have become straight and more stiff than before. But what are the *responsibilities* that come with these rights”? Lotika Sarkar said that in 37 years of teaching Law students in Delhi University, she had never faced that question.

I hope you are all aware of the National Policy on Education adopted by Parliament in 1986, and again in 1992. Under pressure from women’s studies scholars and activists a section titled “Education for Women’s Equality” was included within that Policy, and its Programme of Action – which still remains. I shall conclude by reminding all of you here of that responsibility:-

- i. to gear the entire education system to play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women;
- ii. to promote women’s studies as a part of various courses, and encourage to educational institutions to take up active programmes to further women’s development;
- iii. to widen the access of women in programmes of vocational, technical and professional education; and
- iv. to create dynamic managerial structures to cope with the targets envisaged.

This Seminar reflects that high expectation, and I wish it all success.