

**CWDS SEMINAR ON
GENDER, DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE**

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Session 1

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I am seriously handicapped by my lack of familiarity with much of the current discourse on the three concepts before this seminar. Though a student of politics, I have been, through the last quarter of the century unlearning much of what I learnt before from books - but acquiring many new knowledge and ideas from women who had no access to formal education. But my colleagues insist that I have to make some remarks, so I will confine myself to some reflections on the concepts and their interrelationship - primarily in the historical and cultural context of India.

All feminists agree that gender represents a system of power relations. **In Indian history however, it can only be defined as an instrument to maintain a hierarchical social order designed to perpetuate inequality and diversity of a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural population.** I deliberately exclude religion - (a) because it has been over-emphasised for long and (b) because my current teachers and allies - **poor peasant women in rural India - do not seem to find it of sufficient significance in explaining their powerlessness, despite the continued political use of religion even 50 years after decolonisation.** Razia Patel found similar trends among a cross section of Muslim women in different states. Also, my understanding of Indian history tells me that the hierarchical structure of Indian society has either absorbed, assimilated or influenced all the major religions or religious movements born in or outside the sub-continent, including those which adopted human equality as a core value. Despite conversions, the recently concluded Peoples of India project documents the existence of multiple castes and sub-castes among all the religious/ethnic/culturally identifiable segments of the Indian population. Yet caste continues to be viewed as a Hindu institution.

Social scientists and other thinkers have been grappling with the phenomenon of caste for a long-time - but only a few have appreciated that the major instrument for maintaining the hierarchy, even more than the diversity - is the subordination of women. Srinivas' theory of *Sanskritisation* with increasing subordination/control on women, believed to be applicable only to upwardly mobile Hindu castes - **our studies have found to be equally manifest among all other groups, including the tribals,** generally believed to be more generous in recognising women's rights.

The framers of the Republic's Constitution expected a declaration on gender equality, implicit within equality of all citizens to be adequate to change these complex systems of social and power relationship. However, recognising the power of institutionalised

inequality in certain cases - some special responsibilities of the State were included, within Articles 15 and 16, and the Directive Principles of State Policy. **Ineffectiveness of these have been proved by the widening gender gap in economic, educational/other social development and other spheres. In Politics however this trend is only in representation in elective bodies and structures of governance, not in participation as voters.**

Women, by and large, have demonstrated their **stake in democracy**, especially when they threw out Indira Gandhi's government for the first major attack on democracy since Independence. With the resurgence of the women's movement since the 70s, advocates of 'transformational politics' have increasingly recognised the potential of the movement to deepen democracy in India. Most analysts however, (including some women) continue to harbour the fear that women's large scale entry into power structures will only result in 'co-optation', instead of changing the undemocratic and corruptive elements in these structures.

I have a suspicion that much of these fears are based on the continued undemocratic view of **power** and a **narrow understanding of politics**. In 1979 a few representatives of the women's movement from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, North America and Australia were brought together by the Asian and Pacific Centre for Women and Development in Bangkok to discuss Feminist Ideology and Structures. The group unanimously defined "power to control our lives" as not a 'mode of domination' over others' but as

- “(a) a sense of internal strength and confidence to face life
- (b) the right to determine our choices in life
- (c) the ability to influence the social processes that affect our lives; and (to exert)
- (d) an influence on the direction of social change”

Clarifying that women's oppression and subordination as well as the values surrounding their roles in society are "historically embedded" in oppressive social structures, injustices of the political and economic systems based on race and class and the iniquitous global order, **the group defined the second long term goal of feminism as 'the removal of all forms of inequity and oppression through the creation of a more just social and economic order - nationally and internationally' and women's struggle as 'not only crucial but central to this transformation.**

There has been inadequate dissemination, dispute or discourse about this basic ideology, **leaving the question how do women acquire the 'influence to direct' the processes of change within their own societies/nations or within the context of (globalisation) process which appears to be moving in just the opposite i.e. undemocratic and inegalitarian direction.**

The crisis of democracy today is not confined to India, but has become a global problem. In 1971, with my pride in Indian democracy still intact, I defined the meaning of power in a democratic political system to my raw undergraduate students in an underdeveloped region by using concepts from my engineer father (who specialised in the management of rivers) and

my physicist *guru* D.S. Kothari. Power in a democracy is generated by the people and has to be managed constructively and in the right manner to achieve justice - social, economic and political. If it is mismanaged you have either waste or profligacy, or destructive violence because all energy, like rivers can do both. Today, such a definition has become questionable.

Democracy, as I had understood through most of my adult life - includes three pairs (like “everything in nature”) of inter-related norms of social behaviour - participation and representation, rights and responsibilities and accountability and transparency, - **especially in the generation and management of power.** In the Indian context - democracy being a “radical departure from our inherited social system” - called for some deliberate ‘social engineering’.

The Committee on the Status of Women (CSWI), regarding ‘social engineering’ in a ‘positive interventionist’ manner - pointed out mistakes through **inadequacy and underestimation of the power of inherited social processes** (e.g. *sanskritisation*), as suggested better and more effective interventions in favour of the marginalised, excluded groups; and asked for wider distribution of responsibilities across the socio-political and governmental sub-systems. The Education Policy of 1986 remains an example of such a distributive effort - regrettably unimplemented and misinterpreted.

Today - with democracy being defined in terms of the Free Market Theology - “social engineering” has become ‘politically incorrect’ - and nation states are being asked to reduce their interventionist roles.

In our kind of democracy - this weakening has an extremely negative impact on the **quality of governance - or what I call the management of power.** Responsibility, accountability, transparency - all become impossible, despite all claims and assurances to the contrary.

Discourses on governance in the West may have begun with a focus on “governability” or maintaining supremacy and control. But the most powerful and interventionist institutions in the world today share none of the responsibility, accountability or transparency of nation-states. Citizens in a democracy have a right to expect **efficient and effective governance for the common good.** The success of democracy in India has been demonstrated by increase in organised protests from people when they do not receive this.

However strange it may appear to this audience - we in the women’s movement have found a far greater sense of social responsibility and the understanding of the common good among organised groups of the most deprived, and marginalised women. We went to make them aware of their rights and found them making us more aware of our failures in social and political responsibilities and pursuing the **common good**, - pushing us into problem areas that we had been ignorant of. To cite **only** a few, these include the state of our natural environment, the neglect of children’s right to survive and develop as responsible citizens, and the **negative influences of prosperity/upward mobility/education on people’s sense of social, responsibility.** They insist that women are unable to ‘straighten things out’ because nobody listens to them.

The relationship has been of mutual empowerment, giving some of us the courage to demand **increased participation of women, especially the most deprived ones - in governance, hence the priority to the lowest tiers of democratic governance.**

This vision of **collective empowerment**, the feasibility of which has been the most significant outcome of the Indian women's movement - is very different from the currently popular models of empowerment of women - developed by agencies like the World Bank, and some donor agencies, and sections of our own government - under their dictates.

My last point is to remind you that nearly 45% of our population is still below the voting age, and the share of women in this section is declining at a faster rate during the last 20 years, inspite of reduction in infant mortality and a National Action Plan for the Girl Child. Who represents the needs and concerns of the Child and adolescent population in our democracy? For successive governments - irrespective of parties - methods of population control now include (a) **penalising the victims of child marriage** by debarring them from public employment - while leaving the 'responsible' adults free' and (b) **non-enforcement of the laws against misuse of sex-selection and sex-determination tests to eliminate female foetuses.** How much concern and support did the women's movement get from the 'responsible' citizens of this country or the intelligentsia in stopping such misgovernance?