

Women's Studies: Case for a New Paradigm

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The prevailing paradigm in Women's Studies is predominantly a compensatory model: women as a disadvantaged group should be given greater facilities, benefits, etc. The seeds of a change in this paradigm are becoming visible in the critiques of development models.

A paradigm is a fundamental image of the subject matter. It serves to define what should be studied, what questions should be asked, how they should be asked and what rules should be followed in interpreting the answers. It subsumes, defines, interrelates the problem situations and the rules evolved which are used as models for solving other puzzle situations and the methods and instruments of obtaining knowledge, analysis or solutions.

A paradigm can be discussed with reference to any or all of the following: (a) new purposes; (b) new orientations or perspectives; (c) new methods of inquiry; (d) new theory or theories; and (e) new strategies for resolving the problems arising out of the analysis and prescriptions.

How do we stand with respect to these in Women's Studies?

There has been focus on women since the nineteenth century. This focus dealt with the broad question of women's status in Indian society. On the other hand, Women's Studies today has declared its objectives as:

- (a) removal of women's invisibility (in social knowledge and social action);
- (b) highlighting of problems specific to women;
- (c) redressal of inequality, injustice and oppression; and
- (d) identification of the sources of powerlessness for women.

Hence Women's Studies springs from the belief that women suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex, over and above other forms of injustice in society. If the purpose is to promote equality, justice and liberation, how does Women's Studies hope to achieve it? Presumably knowledge will lead to action.

Will it? The answer hinges on what kind of Women's Studies we develop, who is doing it and how. Methodology in the sense of not only the pedagogy used but committed scholarship is all-important. While the initial backing for Women's Studies came from those deeply concerned about women's status, in its growth it has remained in institutions of higher learning. To some extent, though, funding agencies have supported research by those directly involved in action. Let us look at some of the objectives.

We have indeed achieved some progress in achieving visibility—this is especially true of poor women, and their role in produc-

tion or their economic contribution.

The focus having shifted from the earlier total preoccupation with upper castes and middle classes, it has now begun to be recognised that the interests, problems and needs of different classes and groups of women are distinct despite a common core of gender oppression. What has neither been admitted nor analysed is that while all women may suffer from gender subordination, there can be areas of conflict between the different classes/groups of women. This conflict of interests goes unacknowledged because Women's Studies is undertaken by relatively privileged groups of women and their research on poor women may make the latter 'visible', but that vision is perforce mediated by another.

There are other problems too. Does visibility ensure recognition? Does it do away with undervaluation of women? Does it reduce subordination? Let us take examples. One area where women are invisible is the work they do for society which is outside the market and the cash nexus. This may be family maintenance work (cooking, cleaning, child care, care of the sick and elderly), productive activities like fetching fuel, fodder, water (which in other economies are bought), post-harvest processing activities, animal care, kitchen garden, house repair and various forms of labour in family owned enterprises or work under a putting out system. In other words the entire range of activities related to human survival are ignored, not counted and not valued. How do we value these?

Economics as a science has no tools, no methodology because it has swept these activities outside the sphere of economics. Opportunity cost or market value imputation of market substitutes pose basic theoretical problems, unanswerable at the moment. The market value is based on given supply and demand. If all the work women did in the home, moved into the market, the parameters of supply and demand will change!

These set of problems are acute in third world countries where a major portion of economic activity is still non-monetised and theories that have evolved in industrial-commercial societies cannot accommodate features of societies that are vastly different. This is where the colonial bias comes. However, this bias operates particularly

strongly against women because while men's non-market economic activity like production on one's farm for one's own consumption is given an imputed value, that of women's work is not.

Removing invisibility is one step; it raises a problem where no problem was seen to exist earlier but it does not by itself provide the answer. Valuation of women's work and women's contribution can only come through political action.

The problem of devaluation arises not only because much of women's work goes unacknowledged; it arises even where women's work is visible: e.g., all discriminatory wages based on a prior arbitrary classification of skills as high or low. These criteria have no objective standard. It is a challenge to Women's Studies to come up with an alternative criteria—one that will incorporate indicators such as energy spent, dexterity, endurance, concentration, etc. This is true of all the oppressed, where the process of subjugation is achieved through devaluation, like intellectual work rewarded more highly than physical toil.

Removing invisibility in other areas of social life has also to be attempted through documenting women's contribution to various forms of social or public action, the creative arts and so on. Our main achievement has been to record that women were also there. These adopt the prevailing male standard of achievement. We have not yet formulated for instance how women might have evolved alternative modes of struggle or articulation of creativity. What men do is 'art', what women do is 'craft'. Climbing Everest or winning a war is courage but not sticking out the daily battle of life. Invisibility has to be corrected not only in pointing out the invisible but indicating why only certain actions are acclaimed or to put it more clearly it must uncover the process of visibility-creation, the criteria used for visibility and challenge these as limited modes. These again are political actions. We need to demand not just a temple-entry but the power to re-design the temple.

An attendant problem of invisibility is also the biases and distortions in portraying women's reality wherein truth becomes but a halftruth. Recent studies on the social reform movement, on the national movement, on Gandhi, etc, have begun to question the claim that these movements emancipated women. Feminist scholars are uncovering the liberation content of these movements, largely initiated by men. Behind the emancipatory rhetoric lay a secure patriarchal base. To acknowledge this is not to belittle the immense potential these attempts had but only to show that these were limited by a caste, class and gender bias and therefore we need to go further.

A major achievement is the ongoing critique of development and development models. Much work has been done to show

that development has either not reached women or hit them adversely. I sense here the most promising seeds of a new paradigm. By questioning the ongoing development process, by exposing the link between patriarchy, capitalism and imperialism, today's third world women are moving towards evolving genuine alternatives.

In the west, radical feminists attack the power men have over women; socialist feminists have been concerned with the inadequacies of Marxism as it now is, to incorporate adequately the issue of gender relations. Third world women already have a visible empirical demonstration of the linkage of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. Being a society of rapid change gives one a vantage point to look behind as well as look ahead; to ask questions of how patriarchy worked in precapitalist societies. This process of deconstructing patriarchy, of identifying its characteristics under different social formations is a task that is yet to begin. The tools of research needed for these are woefully inadequate. We need greater methodological precision to analyse the differential impact of both development and patriarchy as between different classes/castes of women. To give an example: housework is not a homogeneous category. Its content, intensity and characteristics vary among different classes of women.

To give another example: There is such a high value placed on fertility both culturally and through material conditions that women's reproductive role in third world countries have a heightened significance. In agrarian societies with primitive technology, high fertility is a requirement for survival, whereas in industrialised societies, the need for additional children falls while the cost of additional children goes up. Women's status in agrarian societies then hinges on their ability to produce children and male children in particular (under patriarchal values). There is therefore, an ambivalence among women on this issue. While some feminists see high fertility as a cost in terms of maternal and infant mortality, other women may see in it a symbol of status.

PROBLEMS OF METHODOLOGY

Apart from inadequate tools for research or tools for revaluing women's contributions mentioned earlier, there is a much more fundamental dilemma for Women's Studies in a society like ours. Women's Studies swears by participatory democratic modes of research, teaching and action. Can we employ these in a deeply hierarchical society?

Another problem is also raised by the question: who does the research. Relatively privileged women researching poor women is bad enough; we also have foreign (mainly western) women doing research on third world women spurred by a greater availability of funds for this than for research in their own countries. Not all these scholars are genuinely feminist. It is their means of survival in a highly competitive academic world. Not only is there a power relation-

ship between these women and their Indian assistants and subjects, the parameters of research tend to be set by them for others to follow as models. The kind of questions looked at and the manner in which they are looked at influence the subject of Women's Studies. For instance, their preoccupation with purdah, and ritual-symbol systems outside the material, particularistic contexts.

Methodology as tools for study is at an elementary stage in India. Oral history, life history, case studies, etc, are just beginning to be used.

No doubt, the anecdotal content of such narratives is rich but such studies often fail to ask the right questions. Merely because we replace a survey by these new forms of data collection we do not necessarily improve the analytical significance of the problem. The instruments needed have to be sensitive, innovative and enormously perceptive. A case in point is the new fashion of appending questions on decision-making in the family or control over income. Superficial questions like 'who decides' cannot reveal the subtle processes at work. Reported decisions after all, merely reflect prior social imperatives. What is decision-making for different classes of women? For a poor woman struggling to keep body and soul together, it is a meaningless term. In a severely circumscribed life, what are the options?

We have said all this regarding the methodology of research. So far, in India, teaching in Women's Studies has begun only in a handful of universities. More than anywhere else, it is in the live human contact that teaching provides, that the true spirit of Women's Studies can be sustained. It is here that Women's Studies can become an instrument of change. But alas, here lies our greatest hurdle. Given the rigidities of our educational system which permit very little innovation, only the bravest of souls will venture to introduce a counter-education. What are the principles that have to be upheld in women's studies if it has to reflect the truths that feminism upholds? These are: absence of hierarchy, discarding rigid discipline boundaries, dissolving the artificial barriers between feeling and thought, between cold logic and the warmth and immediacy of felt experiences, exploring new ways of knowing, new ways of seeing and acquiring a sense of commitment to translate convictions into action. Can these operate in our present system? The answer would lie partly in how sincerely we try.

Nor is it enough to raise awareness. Students of Women's Studies undergo serious disquiet and conflict and are unable to accept the situation as it is any longer but at the same time are distressed at the lack of solutions. We need an understanding of how to handle this distress; how and in what ways some sort of resolution can be attempted and where immediate solutions are not available to impart that sense of courage to withstand the alienating impact of such truths. Women's Studies in the classroom

must be accompanied by counselling centres within the campuses; by various forms of

student-faculty ties; by generating channels for action within the campus and neighbourhood. What most supporters of Women's Studies are afraid of is the possibility of it becoming a mere intellectual discipline, losing touch with its original motive force. Other fears are that it may deteriorate into a purdah scholarship, its presence becoming marginalised instead of acting as a catalyst to change all disciplines and their orientations. It could become a niche in the monument without shaking the foundations.

It is in this context of retaining the action potential of Women's Studies that at every workshop, seminar and conference the issue of how precisely research and action, theory and practice can mesh is raised. In practice this could mean:

- (a) that research provides the input into action
- (b) that action provides the issues for research
- (c) that researchers and activists help each other
- (d) that the activist carries out research and vice versa.

We do have examples of all of these to some extent but there is an undercurrent of distrust in many quarters.

Secondly, unlike in the west, Women's Studies in India has not come as a demand from the movement; it owes its growth much more to a few committed individuals, official patronage and the support of international funding agencies.

We require to think seriously on the meaning of research and action. Nor is it often realised that these two tasks require different order of skills. People who try to combine the two admit how difficult it is. By saying this I am not advocating a permanent division of labour. Research demands reflection, sustained concentration, meticulousness in assembling data, being scrupulous about one's sources and so on. It involves too, a measure of distancing from the object of study, a measure of dispassionateness. Action on the other hand cannot wait, one's responses cannot always be rehearsed in advance. This is not an argument about academic neutrality. What is implied is the need for a subjective concern about the oppressed combined with a dispassionate analysis. What philosophers call 'hermeneutics' comes nearest to this. In analysing any situation one declares one's antecedents, one's interests and puts all one's cards on the table. What is analysed is set against the analyst's own personality, circumstances and beliefs. Do we not in literary criticism usually connect the author's creative product to the influences of his or her own life? We do likewise in any pursuit of knowledge, by explicating one's own stand point. "I talk like this, because I am a woman, I feel this way..."

In historical studies a couple of women historians have attempted an approach that uses negative evidence as first propounded by D P Chattopadhyaya. If we are to understand the origin and development of patriarchy in different social formations, we have to begin work along these lines.

THE PERSPECTIVE

Can one detect a perspective? Women's Studies people argue (indeed rather vociferously) that they are not against men; that the Indian women's movement is not confrontationalist, etc. What does this imply? It implies that the subordination of women in India is an unfortunate accident due to some 'social' malady only. We should therefore, redress women's condition by bringing them up. There is therefore, a shying away from looking at those things that *generate* inequality and oppression.

This brings me to a related issue. Subordination is an exercise of power, and patriarchy is institutionalised collective power. Power in Women's Studies is conceptualised as reduction of helplessness or vulnerability. (If women are beaten up, build shelter homes; inequality in education for girls is sought to be erased by reducing fees, not by addressing the problem of parental preference for boys' education and the sexual division of labour.) Power as power to change, power as autonomy are outside our model. If autonomy is given preeminence then one automatically acquires the power to redefine, the power to question. Much of the empowerment today is in the form of more elbow room.

It is true that in a highly sex-segregated society like India, women might have a measure of autonomy. Women's concerns might be left alone precisely because they were not thought significant and they worked within a patriarchal umbrella. Thus, religious rituals may have given space to women but they were not in their own ultimate interest. Autonomy is feared for another reason. In a strongly affiliative family kin social organisation, the costs of kin obligations are offset by feelings of self-esteem. The strong, self-sacrificing woman evoked respect which means self-surrender is built into the structure.

All these contradictions have not been addressed theoretically. Overall, the model is a compensatory model. Women as a disadvantaged group should be given greater facilities; benefits etc. This is clearly reflected in policy prescriptions.

The instruments of change in India have been legal reform programmes for the poor; setting up facilities like working women's hostels. Protests were mounted against media and violence. These do not add up to initiating a change in the direction of development or altering fundamental social structures like the family. So long as the family is the only support for women, oppression within the family is difficult to tackle. Women's groups who have tried valiantly to intervene in matters of domestic violence find that unless a woman receives wholehearted parental support in the event of a breakdown in marriage it is impossible for her to walk out of it. Not only does she lack the material means to stand on her own, she is censured by society in all possible ways if she attempts to live her life as a single person. The wife has very little bargaining power and the husband/in-laws can get away

with even murder, literally. Deterrant laws are of little avail, when the family, community, the courts, the police are patriarchal in outlook. Despite the enormous physical and psychic cost that women endure within the family we cling to the myth that the family 'supports' the woman. Before we extol the virtues of the Indian family we should assess the reality in objective terms. Peace and reward can often be obtained on the basis of compliance. Instead of declaring that the family must not disintegrate let us first honestly examine whether it is at all integrated at present and if so in what ways. Are we bolting the front door when the family has in fact been invaded by forces from all directions? Authentic research is urgently needed in this area.

In sum we can say, the prevailing para-

digim in Women's Studies is predominantly a compensatory model. Seeds of change are becoming visible in the critique of development models—development models that are exploitative of not only human relations including gender but exploitative of our environment. The approach of conquering nature has to be replaced by one that is in consonance with nature including ourselves who form part of nature. To give an example: in the search for alternative technology what would inform the choice would not be low material cost or small scale but what minimises human cost and maximise human welfare. Into such a vision, we have to incorporate more humane gender relations.

[Based on a presentation made at the ICSSR-Regional Workshop in Women's Studies, Pune, May 1987.]

APPOINTMENTS

Centre for Development Studies

Ullloor, Trivandrum 695 011

The Centre invites applications for two positions of Fellows (equivalent to Professors in Central Universities) in the salary scale of Rs. 4500-150-5700-200-7300. The qualifications and other requirements attached to each of these positions are given below:

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Desirable: Organisational leadership to manage a large computer set-up and interest in developing computer-aided sectoral and economy-wide planning models.

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Applications in the prescribed form, available on request, should reach the Director not later than June 6, 1988. Applicants should enclose one copy each of published or unpublished work which they would like to be considered in support of their candidacy. The names and addresses of two scholars who are familiar with the research/teaching work of the candidate should also be given in the application. Candidates from abroad may send their bio-data indicating the post for which they are applying.

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