

Why Women's Studies?

Language Undefined

Contemporary Relevance and Future Discourse

The dissolution of the Planning Commission and expiry of the Twelfth Plan has imperilled the futures of the centres for Women's Studies, and Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy across public universities in India. These centres were borne out of struggles for inclusion and continue to operate at the margins of the academic set-up. A critical appraisal of Women's Studies has been undertaken here to locate its relevance in contemporary times.

The centres for Women's Studies, and Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, spread across Indian universities were set up and funded by the University Grants Commission (UGC) under the Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-17), and were renewed on a plan-to-plan basis. However, with the expiry of the Twelfth Plan and dissolution of the Planning Commission, the futures of the above-mentioned centres is imperilled, especially those entirely dependent on UGC funds. While the government has been trying to project a pro-marginalised image, cuts in public funding for higher education is building pressure on the functioning of such centres of critical social inquiry and thought, and increasing the financial burden on (marginalised) students.

After much debate and negotiation between representatives of these centres and state bodies, the UGC released a notification on 29 March 2017 extending funding to the centres by a year. This is at best a stopgap measure. Confusion and uncertainty about the future of these centres still looms large. Taking the Women's Studies programme as a case in point, this article is a modest attempt to examine the importance of such centres in institutions of higher education. These concerns, while not new, require urgent attention owing to two important factors: the resurgence of right-wing patriarchal attack on feminist scholarship and educational spaces that question and challenge the brahminical social order, and cuts in funding to higher education and push towards privatisation.

Genesis of Women's Studies in India

The genesis of Women's Studies as an academic discourse in India draws extensively from the history of the women's movement, which has been instrumental in articulating the question of women's history and shaping feminist discourses. Feminist historiography has been developed with the declared agenda of not only making women visible in history, but also recording their contributions to various social and historical processes. The purpose is to integrate women's experiences into the dialectics of history (Chanda 2000). By recovering stories of women's activism, feminists have contributed towards building a new knowledge base, providing new ways of seeing and understanding women and, what qualifies as history. The idea behind such an exercise is not only to make women visible and provide a numerical count of women's participation in history, but also to develop a more holistic and nuanced approach towards knowledge production. It is this ideation that has drawn researchers to Women's Studies.

Women's Studies, as a paradigm of intellectual inquiry and institutional site in academics, was drawn out of the women's movement in the 1970s. Women's history is, by and large, a part of the complex process and struggle for recognising and visibilising women's lives, and their experiences. The official recognition of Women's Studies as an academic discipline in the university system has a history of more than four decades. Institutions such as the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the women's movement were critical players in this complex process (Pappu 2002).

Besides Women's Studies centres, there are various other non-academic forums for addressing women's/gender issues in academic institutions. These centres are initiated and funded by state governments, autonomous academic institutions, and government agencies under the guidance of the UGC (Sreerexha 2016). Women's Studies was initially conceptualised as a branch of the social sciences and humanities. However, today, it has emerged as a discipline with a core body of theory within an interdisciplinary framework. It closely engages with other social science disciplines such as sociology, economics, political science, history and literature among others as developments in these areas are intrinsic to knowledge production in Women's Studies. In the process, it has been able to question existing concepts, tools, techniques and methodologies across disciplines that render women marginal and invisible, giving it a necessary critical edge.

Institutionally, Women's Studies entered the university system with the establishment of the Research Centre for Women's Studies (RCWS) at the SNDT Women's University, Mumbai (Poonacha 2003; Anandhi and Swaminathan 2006). Around this time, three more institutions namely, the Institute of Social Studies Trust (founded in 1976), the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS, established in 1980) and the Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies (in 1985) were established to conduct new research on women with the aim of achieving socio-economic and political transformation (Anandhi and Swaminathan 2006; John 2008). The alarming findings of the Committee on the Status of Women in India published in the Towards Equality report (1974) provided the much-needed push for state realisation that women's lives, especially those of poor rural women, needed recognition and change. In order to achieve this objective, research units of Women's Studies came to be established in 1974. This resulted in a fundamental shift from viewing "women as subjects to be educated" to seeing "women as the new subjects of investigation and study" (John 2008). Women's Studies was, thus, regarded as an instrument of transformation, not only to change state policies but also to transform women's perceptions about themselves (Mazumdar 1987).

Women have always been made the focus of social reform relating to the broad question of their status in Indian society since the 19th century. However, it was the institutionalisation of Women's Studies that facilitated the permeation of feminist ideas into the university system. With the introduction of feminist concepts of patriarchy, sexual division of labour, gender inequality, injustice and oppression, into its language and analysis, the development of Women's Studies has effected the visibilisation of women in social knowledge and action.

Beginning in 1987, Women's Studies centres were established in select universities of the country with a three-pronged thrust of teaching, research and extension (Sharma 2012). The support provided by the UGC to these centres since the Seventh Plan has led to the visibility of Women's Studies in the university system. The first UGC guidelines were brought out in 1986 for the development of Women's Studies in Indian universities and colleges (Anandhi 2017). At the same time, the new National Policy on Education, 1986 document not only referred to education for women's equality and empowerment, but specifically mentioned the role of Women's Studies in achieving the objective. The establishment of UGC-supported Women's Studies centres were seen as the culmination of a long-drawn struggle for legitimacy by the leading figures of Vina Mazumdar and Neera Desai (John 2008). The further expansion of these centres across universities today, is reflective of the prolonged period of struggle fought by the women's movement to introduce and institutionalise Women's Studies in institutions of higher education. While this expansion in the last three decades seems to indicate an acceptance of Women's Studies by the larger academic community, there is no denial that the discipline continues to occupy a marginal location within disciplinary hierarchy.

Contribution to Higher Education

Women's Studies through its teaching, training, research, scholarship and advocacy has had a far-reaching impact on modern academia. The revival of the women's movement in the late 1970s brought new direction, scope and dynamism to Women's Studies. However, Women's Studies and women's movements have undergone significant changes over the last three decades. A careful mapping of these changes reveals the expansion of the scope and focus of Women's Studies from the time of its inception. Today, the usage of the term "women's movements" instead of "women's movement" is reflective of this change in both academia and activism. Moreover, the major developments of 21st century feminism including, the emergence of the Dalit-Bahujan feminist movement and studies, movements by Adivasi women, Muslim women, transgender women, and studies on themes spanning class, caste, sexuality and gender have come to occupy a predominant place in Women's Studies today.

Women's Studies emerged as part of a broader process of the critical evaluation of issues that structured the way women lived their everyday realities. Issues of violence, communalisation of society, rampant caste discrimination, dowry deaths, female foeticide and infanticide, sexual harassment, lower female work participation rates, ill effects of globalisation and many more are not just real issues that affect women, but they define the very world of education that Women's Studies is a part of. This makes its task even more crucial because these areas are equally compelling and challenging.

Women's Studies has played a critical role in redefining the notion of "social," transcending former narrow formulations. A significant example in this regard has been the conception of "class." In contrast to earlier formulations of positioning class in opposition to the structures of gender, caste, and ethnicity, Women's Studies practitioners played a key role in making class and gender central to the analysis of women's oppression. They argue that the disposition of gender is crucial to the understanding of class differentiation in society (Mazumdar 1994). Yet another example pertains to the notion of "development." They argued that development is not an innocuous term, but heavily value-laden. While Women's Studies scholarship did not question the idea of development per se, it raised concerns about the kind of development undertaken and its differential impact on people across social classes and groups. They were critical of the kind of development that was insensitive to gender concerns and issues of other marginalised groups (Mazumdar 1994: 45-46).

The mandate of Women's Studies has undergone changes from its earlier conceptualisation, in terms of challenging its limitations and broadening its spectrum with an emphasis on equity and inclusiveness. If in its embryonic years, Women's Studies was exclusively women-centred, today it has broadened its scope to encapsulate gender non-normative persons, trans people, queer and other groups, marginalised on the basis of their identities and sexual orientation.

Gender oppression, along with class differentiation and caste discrimination is a stark reality of the Indian society. The contribution of Indian diasporic feminists has highlighted the predicament of women's multiple and overlapping marginalisations in the complex interplay of caste, class, gender, ethnicity and religion. Feminist writings on an array of subjects including experience, identity, community, and dominant conceptions of multiculturalism and citizenship; interdisciplinary programmes like Women's Studies, and race and ethnic studies; pedagogies of accommodation and dissent; and transnational women's movements for health and reproductive rights, have all contributed towards a universal feminist pedagogical framework (Patel 2010). Thus, Women's Studies programmes have pushed academia to function in a more inclusive and democratic fashion.

Emphases on teaching, training and research have played a key role in Women's Studies classrooms, and there is constant reiteration of the reciprocal and generative relationship between these aspects. Their commitment to interdisciplinarity has challenged higher education to rethink the foundational assumptions of how knowledge is produced, organised and evaluated (Berger 2013). Furthermore, the pedagogical emphasis on the dialectical relationship between "theory" and "praxis" vis-à-vis the women's question is another important contribution.

Besides these achievements, Women's Studies has had to struggle for a space of its own in academia and the social sciences in India in its formative years. A surface-level analysis of its contributions to higher education correspondingly demands the ability to critically self-reflect on some of Women's Studies limitations in order to assess its relevance in modern times.

Making Women's Studies Relevant

As outlined above, Women's Studies has had a long and stable history, and can no longer be treated as a new discipline. While it was born out of the women's movement in India, its disjuncture with activism created an uneasy alliance in networking between "scholars" and "activists." For Mazumdar (1994), the relationship between Women's Studies and women's movements is a complex one. She rightly points out how Women's Studies practitioners tend to develop a language of their own consisting of terminologies and jargons inhibiting communication with ordinary people and connection with the masses. Sometimes, this promotes the creation of a hierarchy within the Women's Studies movement, between those who are in pursuit of a theoretical rigour in the discipline and those who are more practically oriented to the issues at ground level. It has been noticed that such a pursuit of theoretical rigour also encourages elitism, thereby, drifting away from the pressing concerns that affect the lives of the majority of women (Mazumdar 1994: 50).

Since the beginning, women's movements have contributed extensively by giving expression to the voices of ordinary women and integrating their concerns in the research agenda of Women's Studies (Patel 1998). Likewise, in order to bridge the gap between activism and academics, Women's Studies should strive to break the isolation of academia and draw from the experiences of others. The fear and scepticism of losing one's foundational goal lingers on both sides. While women activists feel that too much involvement in academics might result in a disconnection with issues in the field, Women's Studies scholars fear that overt preoccupation with activism will erode the discipline of its academic rigour and scientific endeavour. Such a battle cry for legitimate edge in academia will only prove detrimental for a discipline that is already marginalised in the university system.

One reason for its marginalisation also depends on Women's Studies' own battle for autonomy and separation from the mainstream. Autonomy might keep the discipline away from the dangers of possible co-optation by the academic establishment. However, gender being the central category of analysis in social science, such a move will only drift Women's Studies from its original goal of acting as a "catalyst" and influencing other broad-based movements and larger systems. Thus, autonomy, separation or independent existence will only lead to isolation, exclusion, marginalisation and even, alienation from the mainstream.

My point is that Women's Studies should include both, a political as well as an intellectual agenda for it to be meaningful to people and transform their lives. Production of theory without engaging in political practice dilutes the basic objective of Women's Studies as an intellectual arm of the women's movement. As scholars of Women's Studies, a critical self-reflection of some of these limitations will only strengthen the core values of the discipline and challenge the forces that threaten its disciplinary grids and political visions.

In the context of the increasing push towards privatisation, Women's Studies faces the challenging task of consistently pursuing its goals of gender equality and social justice. Until now, Women's Studies centres have been able to survive and sustain themselves due to financial support from the government and its agencies such as the UGC. However, with the present financial crisis in higher education, further growth and institutionalisation of these centres and cells seem like a far-fetched possibility. Unlike other disciplines and centres, the temporariness accorded to disciplines such as Women's Studies and Dalit Studies among others, is a way of ensuring its marginalisation in the university system. The uncertainty of these academic centres not only has an impact on the growth and expansion of these disciplines, but also renders the faculty extremely vulnerable, affecting their intellectual ability, contribution and access to resources (Sreerekha 2016). Additionally, students pursuing such programmes in universities also stand to lose significantly in the event of such crises.

The repercussions of fund cuts to higher education are much larger than we envision. This is because cuts in funding would consequently result in major seat cuts and frequent increase in fees, which will inevitably affect the academic aspirations of a large section of students, especially those belonging to the historically disadvantaged groups. This in turn will contribute to the "elite" character of the centres of higher education including Women's Studies. The plan grants to institutions of higher education have been affected drastically with the dissolution of the Planning Commission, and the establishment of NITI Aayog which wants to invite private players to take over the charge of education. This process is linked to the prevailing political economy. Another important feature of curtailment has been the reduction in non-plan allocations to UGC and other higher educational institutions (Khan 2014).

The new forms in which caste and communalism emerged in the 1990s posed serious challenges to women's movements and Women's Studies scholarship in the country. Right-wing politics has insidiously permeated educational institutions, policies, and ideologies, resulting in the rise of non-secular elements in education and "saffronisation" of government bodies and other research institutions (Poonacha 2003). The outreach of right-wing politics is not just confined to Women's Studies, it has serious implications on Dalit studies as well, raising important concerns for the women's and anti-caste movements in the country. Patriarchal and casteist in its essence, right-wing fundamentalism targets women across social groups be they Dalits, Adivasis, queer or other marginalised groups. The failure of the women's movement to effectively counter them has fragmented the movement (Poonacha 2003).

Given these challenges in the current political context, Women's Studies should strengthen its determination to seriously engage with the specificities of caste, class, and community in gender issues. It should imagine and situate itself in the wider context of common democratic struggles, thereby, linking women's rights to the rights of other marginalised groups. It is only by strengthening connections within and between movements that we will be able to combat forces and structures that constantly trivialise and attack dissenting voices, critical thinking, and free expressions.

Conclusions

From its inception right up to the present, Women's Studies continues to fight for legitimacy in the university system. The threat of suspension of funding by the UGC to Women's Studies and other similar centres that are a part of the planned fund for institutes of higher education is an example of their marginal location in academic establishments. Women's Studies through its teaching, training, research, and advocacy has contributed significantly to academia in the modern times. As an academic field, it links itself to the grass-roots movements in pursuit of gender equality. However, it has been observed that the seeming disconnect between academics and activism has led to some of

the challenges that the discipline faces today. At a time when higher education is facing the brunt of reduced public expenditure on education, the alliance between women's movements and Women's Studies should be made stronger to counter the forces that attack our ideologies, our philosophies, and existence. The state is keen on shrinking the autonomy of higher education in India in favour of making it exclusionary to the detriment of students from marginalised sections. In the changing political context, the committed academic community must join hands with larger democratic struggles to pursue knowledge and practice that transform policies and build perspectives to empower the marginalised of the country—among which women constitute a significant portion.

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