Dynamics of Women’s Studies and Women’s Movement by Vibhuti Patel

Professor Vibhuti Patel

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This book by Kusum Datta is a result of extensive research at the Asiatic Society, Kolkata in order to showcase the important pedagogical status attained by women’s studies (ws) in the mainstream academia. Jasodhara Bagchi sets the tone with an overview of the state of art in women's studies and the women's movement.

Datta has painstakingly and judiciously constructed “herstory” of women's studies and the women's movement in India. She analyses the origin, development and direction of ws in the context of its intimate relationship with the Indian women's movement (wm). The dialectical relationship between “pedagogy” and “praxis”, vis-à-vis the “women’s question”, has been a matter of great concern for pioneers of ws such as Neera Desai, Veena Mazumdar, Maitreyi Krishnaraj, Latika Sarkar, Sardamoni, Leela Dube and Shusheela Kaushik. The need to study women's issues in academic institutions and to conduct research based on experiential material and affirmative action was beginning to be discussed among Indian women's studies scholars by the early 1980s.¹ The discourse on this subject has proved to be a fruitful exercise for activists, academics, researchers and policy planners at national and international levels. This book tries to examine the following issues: the genesis of interaction between ws and the wm in India; the contribution of ws to mainstream academia – economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, literature, history, education, psychology; the analytical tools and the theoretical insights provided by ws and the wm in India; the research methodology and agenda of the ws, ongoing debates on the scope and limitations of ws within institutionalised structures, the shift of focus from ws to gender studies; the economics and politics of funding, consultancy and priorities in research. Pioneers of ws in India defined it as a discipline that involved research, documentation, teaching, training and action.

**Book Review**

**Women’s Studies and Women’s Movement in India since the 1970s: An Overview** by Kusum Datta (Kolkata: Asiatic Society), 2007, pp.xxv + 342, Rs 320.

**Genesis of Women’s Studies in India**

Chapter 1 starts with answering the question, “What Is Women's Studies?” It is understood that women have a subordinate status in our society, so the knowledge-base created by ws should be used for empowerment of women. It also provides the international and national, historical and political contexts for the beginning of the women's movement and women's studies in India.

The UN declaration of 1975 as the International Women's Year coincided with the Emergency in India. By the time the Emergency was lifted in 1977, several women’s groups had developed around democratic rights issues. The press swung into “action” after the imposed silence of nearly two years. Atrocities committed against women during the Emergency were openly documented and reported in the press. These atrocities struck a chord in most women's experiences of life in the family, in the streets, in the workplace and in political groups. The culmination of this process was reached in 1980 when many women’s groups took to the street to protest. During the 1980s, the issue of women's oppression was depicted not only in discussion forums, seminars and “serious” articles in journals but also in the popular media. Women who had on their own identified the sources of their problems and indignity, began to acquire a language, an organisational platform, a collective identity and legitimacy they did not have earlier.

The Status of Women's Committee appointed by the Government of India released a voluminous report in 1974. This report entitled “Towards Equality” was prepared by scholars with an interdisciplinary perspective and was presented in Parliament, where it received a tremendous response from the decision-making bodies, the State apparatus and the print media. Shocking description of the reality of Indian women's lives, which was manifested in a declining sex ratio, a very high rate of female mortality and morbidity, marginalisation of women in the economy and discriminatory personal laws were some of the major highlights of the report. But the report failed to throw any light on violence against women in the civil society and by the custodians of law and order. The major achievement of the report lay in the policy decision taken by a research body like the Indian Council of Social Science Research (icssr), i.e., to provide financial support to scholars committed to the women's cause to conduct research into problems faced by women in poverty groups.

Chapter 2 delineates the processual dimensions of emergence and proliferation of ws centres (wsc) in India. The first wsc was established at the SNDT Women's University, in Mumbai in 1974. Chapter 3 is devoted to the formation, development and expansion of the Indian Association of Women's Studies as an academic body “to promote women's interests and to push the ws movement forward” (p 61).

Chapter 4 looks at the “Two Pillars of ws”, the Research Centre for Women's Studies (Mumbai) and the Centre for Women's Development Studies (Delhi). Their contribution in terms of pathbreaking research, documentation and archives, training and mentoring, curriculum development, textbook writing, publications in regional languages and teaching and extension and action plan, networking between ws and the wm at the local, national, regional and global levels has been glorious.

An in-depth study of WSCs in West Bengal is provided in Chapter 5, in which the author discusses the formation of the Women's Studies Research Centre (wsrc) at Calcutta University in 1989 and School of Women's Studies (sws) at Jadavpur University with their respective founding directors Bharati Ray (history) and Jasodhara Bagchi (literature),
both renowned academicians within the mainstream academia.

**The Dynamics**

Chapter 6 provides an understanding of the contemporary women's movement and its interface with women's studies. Between 1977 and 1979 new women's groups emerged in cities like Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Bombay, Ahmadabad, Patna, and Madras. They organised protest actions against dowry murders, beauty contests, sexist portrayal of women in media, pornographic films and literature imported from abroad, introduction of virginity tests by the UK immigration authorities, custodial rape and the pitiable condition of women prisoners. These groups were multicultural in their composition and worldview. As a result, their political agenda reflected the contemporaneous handling of the complex reality of women constructed by interplay of class, caste, religion, ethnicity and globalisation. The spokespersons of these groups had the advantage of a high level of ideological investment and the experience of the radical movements-students and youth movements, the dalit movement, working class struggles, the tribal movement of the late 1960s. Their collective wisdom provided the main backbone to the women's rights movement. Their newsletters, magazines and pamphlets in regional languages as well as in English provided a creative way to handle women's problems. The launching of the magazine *Manushi* in January 1979 was a qualitative leap in this direction.

Chapter 7 of the book under review profiles the consolidation of the base of WS in India and its search for identity and goals. The discourse on this subject has proved to be a fruitful exercise for activists, academics, researchers, policy planners, law-makers, administrators and the UN system. The apex body of higher learning, the University Grants Commission defined women's studies as a discipline that involved research, documentation, teaching, training and action.

Currently, the UGC supports 80 women's studies centres within the university system.

**Threats and Challenges to WSCs**

Chapter 8 is devoted to “Women's Studies at the Threshold of the 21st century”. During the NDA government’s rule,WSCs faced tremendous difficulties due to the right wing’s onslaught. The UGC's circular to rename WSC as “Family Studies Centres” provoked massive protests from the women's studies scholars in India and diaspora feminists from Europe, Canada and the US.

The author rightly points fingers at challenges and tribulations such as the conservative university environments, impact of market forces on women's studies, disjunction with activism, the uneasy alliance and chasm in networking between “scholars” and “activists”, ghettoisation and the exclusionary nature of WS. The major development in 21st century feminism has been the emergence of the dalit-bahujan feminist movement and studies and currently themes such as “dalit women’s identity” and “caste, class and gender” carry top priority in the intellectual examination/quest in WS.

The contribution of Indian feminists in the diaspora has highlighted women's predicament in the context of marginalisation of women as a result of complex interplay of caste, class, ethnicity, race, and religion. Feminist writing on experience, identity, and community; 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 grass-roots ecological solutions and consumer, health, and reproductive rights have definitely provided a universal feminist pedagogical framework.

The author argues that Indian women's studies scholars have never been blind followers of their western counterparts. This is reflected in their balancing of pedagogy with praxis and a context-specific use of the methodologies of post-colonialism and postmodernism. In fact, Indian feminists in the diaspora have reshaped these methodologies for the scholarship in the third world. She also provides detailed narrative of the emergence of cultural studies in the wake of growing marginalisation of women due to neoliberal policies of “market fundamentalism” and “identity politics” promoted by “religious fundamentalism”.

Chapter 9 entitled “Feminist Scholarship and Activism since the 1990s” focuses on an impasse in the women's studies movement (the so-called post-feminist phase) and demands rethinking about mainstreaming of WS. She advises, “feminists like good strategists must avoid ‘excessive institutionalisation’ or ‘depoliticisation of feminist agenda’, identify and ‘seize available opportunity space’ for using state's potential for social change to

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their advantage outdoing others who manipulate its potential as a mechanism for social control of women” (p 284).

The concluding chapter raises a pertinent question: Whither the feminist movement in India? It is necessary to evaluate critically the weaknesses of women's problems through litigation. Critics ask, what happens when the patriarchal State itself unleashes violence against women? Who will police the State? What about the shoddy implementation of the plethora of laws that have been fought for and won? The environment movements and citizen's movements are now getting strong. Both ws and wm must build alliances with these movements to highlight the gender aspect of ecological degradation and good governance. According to the author, the ghettoisation of ws and the wm is a major bottleneck and both “need to form strategic alliance not only with other broader social movements of the weaker sections of the society for their rights but also with sympathetic men who are fellow travellers and are keen to dislodge the centuries old patriarchies” (p 299).

Some Misses
This exhaustive work misses out on the crucial contribution towards ws and the wm in India made by sparrows (Women's Archives) and Vacha Women's Library over the past two decades.

Except for this, the book provides an insightful and judicious analysis, balanced narrative of origin, development, growth, contribution and challenges faced by the wscs within the university system, autonomous women's organisations, and politically active women's fronts such as the All India Democratic Women's Association.

The most significant contribution of this book is in bringing to the fore women's agency in the construction of knowledge, the prism of "gender". This is reflected in an exhaustive list of references encompassing reports, articles, scholarly papers, manifestos, newsletters, journals, books, primary research publications.

The book is strongly recommended to all change agents-activist scholars, gender trainers, movers and shakers in ws and wm, alert academicians and politicians wedded to the cause of gender equality and gender justice.

Vibhuti Patel (vibhuti.np@gmail.com) has been a women's rights activist for over three decades and is with the SNDT University, Mumbai.

NOTE

Books Received

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Bremen, Jan (2010): Outcast Labour in Asia (New Delhi: Oxford University Press); pp xii + 391, Rs 859.
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