



Research on gender issues in India

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Notes taken by Frédérique Pagani

In her talk, Dr. Kamala Ganesh gave a brief review of 2.5 decades of research on women in India and then gave some idea of the conceptual and theoretical dimensions of her own research on gender, and what kind of generalizations one could make about social structure, culture and gender in India which will be relevant for those working in various disciplines.

An important landmark in the development of women's studies as an area of research is the 1974 publication "Towards Equality : Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India ", which focussed national attention on the deteriorating position of women after independence. The 1975 UN International Year of Women which gave international focus to the women's question and a high profile platform for research, advocacy and action is another landmark. Now after close to three decades, there is an impressive body of research on women in India. Women's Studies has got established as an area of research, with multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary dimensions. The University Grants Commission has set up a number of Women's Studies centres with focus on extension and outreach as well as research and teaching. Government recognition of the policy salience of this issue has led to the setting up of a separate Women and Child Dept in the Ministry of Human Resource Development.

Public debate and media coverage on women's issues is high and there is a heightened recognition of women's importance as voters in the electoral process. These developments provide the external context in which Women's Studies research and teaching functions. Gender is now a popular topic for research. But unfortunately it is treated as a soft option, and sometimes the level of research is banal. Now some male students also opt for these courses and researchers on women and gender also include more males.

Undergraduate foundation courses in humanities and social sciences usually include some topics on gender. Research on gender has been closely connected with the women's movement in India. There has also been a strong component of policy oriented research in women's studies. Till now, despite much diversification , a fairly close and mutual relationship between issues in academic research, policy research, activism. In the early years of WS conferences would invariably include a debate between the activists and academics on the hierarchical division of labour between the two and a constant pressure on academics to make their work on women less esoteric and more socially relevant.

Having sketched a brief picture of the state of Women's Studies in India, Dr.Ganesh proceeded to distinguish two major phases in the nature of the research questions on women and gender. In the early stages of Women's Studies, the approach was to call attention to the neglect of the gender perspective in various disciplines and areas and explicitly include women's concerns and viewpoints in the analysis. This is sometimes referred to as the " add women and stir " approach and it continues to be an important approach and given that women's invisibility and neglect is quantitatively huge, it has continuing relevance. But this has been supplemented with a second set of questions. If there was a neglect of gender in the systems of knowledge that these modern social, political and economic institutions are based on, then how can we accept the claim of objectivity of these systems and disciplines which embody them. Questions are being asked on methodology, epistemology, and the recognition of androcentric categories

within disciplines and within development paradigms.

Dr. Ganesh offered another categorisation of the extant research. There is one stream that broadly is concerned with documenting discrimination and bias, both empirical and conceptual and analysing reasons and offering solutions.

And another stream that does not accept passive victimhood picture but is engaged in retrieving : cultural and historical models of empowerment, protest and resistance, women's voices, women's writings, women's sustenance of environment, women's contribution to national movement, and various subaltern movements.

Dr. Ganesh gave a detailed account of how the gender perspective was dealt with in different disciplines : economics, demography, political sciences, law, literature, history sociology anthropology, etc. In the second part of her talk, Dr. Ganesh drew upon examples from her own work to illustrate how gender relations were complex and nuanced and how gender as a conceptual category could not be understood without reference to kinship, caste and the cultural matrix. There was no homogeneous ideological framework for understanding gender. The cultural matrix had elements which denigrated or marginalised women, and also elements which valued women's labour, fertility and sexuality. There were considerable variations in the position of women, caste-wise, region wise and between caste communities and tribal communities. Patriarchy as an explanatory concept had to be nuanced in terms of Indian specificities.

Pr. KAMALA GANESH, 25 mai 1998