

# INSTITUTIONALISATION OF WOMEN'S STUDIES IN INDIA

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PAPER: FEMINIST THOUGHTS AND PRACTICES I

SCHOOL OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

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# DETAILS OF THE MODULE

- FOCUS OF THE MODULE

- The module focuses on the formative years of Women's Studies and the changing nature of its institutionalisation as it goes through a period of crisis and uncertainty in the present times.

- OBJECTIVE OF THE MODULE

- The module aims to give an idea of the history of the 'women's studies movement' in India, its strength and the challenges that it has faced in higher education in the last forty years.

# WHAT IS WOMEN'S STUDIES (WS)?

- WS was envisaged as an 'interventionist' and as a 'critical perspective' within higher education in its formative years (1980s) which recommended an integration of women's question in all existing disciplines.
- WS was conceived in order to enable the questioning of the existing educational system and dominant systems of knowledge.
- By institutionalizing WS, the educational system was expected to be made accountable to expand the social concern against injustice, marginalization and oppression of women
- WS Centres/Schools in higher education institutions were expected to play a "catalytic role" in motivating the entire university community to address issues that concern women's development.



# WHAT IS WOMEN'S STUDIES?

- WS focuses on critical interrogation of existing disciplines and talks about inclusion and visibility of women through academic activism.
- WS has an interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary perspective which integrates activism with academics.
- WS integrates women into the existing curriculum and adds new knowledge of women into research and teaching projects.
- WS concentrates on rethinking theoretical and analytical approaches in existing disciplines.
- WS therefore plays a catalytic role in linking with other academic departments in universities and also in maintaining links with women's groups -- outreach

# FORMATIVE YEARS OF WOMEN'S STUDIES: THE "TOWARDS EQUALITY MOMENT"

- An insightful research was undertaken by the Committee of the Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1975. Dr. Vina Mazumdar was the Member Secretary of the CSWI.
- The report revealed the dismal state of many Indian women in areas of health, employment and political participation, even after many years of independence.
- The report proved the following two assumptions as baseless:
  - Constitutional guarantee of gender equality had ended women's subordination
  - Educated urban women were superior to their rural sisters in understanding women's issues → demolition of the urban educated women's patronizing attitude towards rural women
- The 'Towards Equality moment' created the necessary conditions for new perspectives to emerge both within and outside higher education.





# INSTITUTIONALISATION OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

- The explicit idea of 'Women's Studies' (WS), as an area of enquiry and of practice within public higher education, was implemented for the first time in 1974 at the SNDT Women's University in Bombay (now Mumbai) while the CSWI was carrying out its research.
- Neera Desai became the Director of this Women's Studies Centre (WSC) which opened a research unit with the larger objective of recognizing and transforming the lives of rural women.
- The institutionalisation of WS in Indian higher education was first structurally accepted and incorporated nationally in 1986 through the National Policy on Education (NPE).
- Under a special section on the topic of WS, the policy identified four dimensions of how WS programmes would be operationalized: teaching, research, training and extension.
- Following this policy intervention, universities launched Women's Studies Centres/Schools with numbers rising to 22 in the first 5 years, 54 in the first decade, up to 163 by 2017.

# ROLE OF UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION (UGC)

- In the initial stage, the primary focus was not about establishing departments of WS in Indian universities. Instead, efforts were aimed at interventions into, and transformation of education, from the premise of HE.
- Madhuri Shah, the first woman to become the chairperson of the UGC, the body responsible for promoting and coordinating university education in India, stated in 1981,

*the ideal state would be reached when women's concerns, perceptions and problems have been so internalized by different disciplines at different levels of the educational process, that there will be no need for promoting WS separately.*

(Shah cited in John, 2008:8)

- Madhuri Shah sent letters to all universities in 1983 to incorporate WS in their academic and research activities.
- She was disappointed with the response, finding that “universities had not applied their minds to the issues of restructuring of courses or curriculum development as a part of taking note of the new knowledge” (Shah cited in John, 2008:9).

# WOMEN'S STUDIES MOVEMENT

- The “women’s studies movement” (Anandhi and Swaminathan, 2006:4447) was thus launched with the larger aim of questioning the absence of women in university teaching programmes, and raising awareness that the presence of such women could contribute to challenging gender discrimination and exploitation in society.
- There were meetings held and lobbying aimed at the highest levels – the UGC and the Ministry of Education – which produced a shift in the National Policy of Education 1986.
- Women’s Studies came to be “identified as an instrument of change” (Krishnaraj, 2004:87) with the process of its institutionalisation holding the promise of preventing future injustice.



# POSITIONING OF SCHOOLS/CENTRES OF WOMEN'S STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- WSCs have always been awkwardly positioned within the university's intellectual traditions; the functions of teaching, research, institutional service and outreach activities; institutional identities; and differing notions of the ethico-political purpose of their work by scholar-activists.
- These centres/schools have continued to operate with minimal infrastructure and funding, in part because they were placed in the 'Non-Formal Education' (NFE) account of the UGC. The justification for this location was that these schools/centres acted as bridges between academia and activism (Datta 2011, John 2008).
- These centres/schools have been marked by fluctuating financial support.
- The pattern of funding until the Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-17) was that the UGC released funds and gave extension to the WS scheme for five-year period, and so their budgets, activities and appointments were planned accordingly.

# PRESENT CRISIS OF SCHOOLS/CENTRES OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

- Given the consistent delay in receiving funds from the UGC, it was not unusual for the University administration to provide monetary loans from HEIs. While release of funds by the UGC was delayed, the university administration were convinced about the eventual release of funds by the UGC.
- The Five-Year Plan budgets, developed and evaluated by the Planning Commission (1951-2014) was recently replaced by the NITI Aayog (2015-17).
- With the abrupt end to the Five-Year Plan financial scheme, the extension of the WS scheme by the UGC in terms of their functioning and financial budgeting was reduced to an annual event.
- The 11<sup>th</sup> Plan (2007-2012) and 12<sup>th</sup> Plan (2012-2107) had been especially encouraging for signalling growth in the recognition of WS with selected WSCs, such as the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, declared as 'Advanced Centres'.
- This resulted in awards of escalated financial assistance, an increase in teaching, research and non-teaching posts, with School like ours becoming "strong academic centres of teaching and learning, generating new thinking and knowledge of feminist theory and offering WS courses" (Anandhi & Swaminathan 2006: 4446)

# COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN'S STUDIES AND THE INDIAN STATE

- The paradoxical role of the state was evident in the 1970s when one arm of the state had implemented a state of Emergency in India in June 1975 exhibiting its extreme repressive powers, and its other arm had allowed the 'negative' research findings about status of Indian women to reach the United Nations through the 'Towards Equality' report.
- As an institutional response to the challenges thrown up by the 'Towards Equality' Report, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) was able to start a sponsored programme on WS in 1975.
- Vina Mazumdar recalls what Professor J,P.Naik, then Member-Secretary of the ICSSR, told her a few days after the declaration of the Emergency, "Let us concentrate on women. I do not think the political implications of such research will be immediately understood by the powers that be." (Mazumdar 1990, 5).

# CHANGING NATURE OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

- We need to therefore ask, “what made women’s studies political and yet safe in the 1970s but made it unsafe later on?”
- During the initiation of women’s studies both within and outside university structures, the strong focus on new research required no direct confrontation with institutional structures.
- The situation changed as the ‘discipline’ gained strength in terms of its rich scholarship, research and methodologies (John 2008, Banerjee et al 2011, Pappu 2002).
- The marginal vantage point of WS in the university space has been extremely valuable, unique and yet expectedly difficult. Today, more than four decades later, the field of women’s studies is vast, with the “openly political and non-neutral field” having successfully developed a critical feminist language, theories and methodologies (John 2008: 16).
- WS has expanded and moved beyond every conventional discipline, moving beyond outreach and advocacy issues, and aiming to play an integral role in transformation of knowledge formation and social formation. Has this made WS too feminist and hence ‘unsafe’ and ‘threatening’ in ways that are unacceptable?



# CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN'S STUDIES

- In its unofficial draft of guidelines for the Tenth Plan (2002-07) for WSCs, the UGC had proposed renaming WSCs as 'Women and Family Studies Centres'. This ideologically regressive step was taken without consultation with WSCs or HEIs, and without justification for such change given.
- Widespread protests from WS communities against the UGC proposal deplored the arbitrary interference and forced the UGC to rescind its decision (Bagchi 2003).
- The final 10<sup>th</sup> Plan (2003-07) UGC Guidelines for WSCs instead referred to international women's conferences and treaties oriented towards achieving gender equality and empowerment of women, suggesting conflicting frameworks at play.
- While the 12<sup>th</sup> Plan guidelines for WSCs clearly emphasised supporting and strengthening WSCs towards upgrading them to statutory departments within HEIs, UGC strategies changed with the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Plan (2012-17) in 2017. They effectively constructed WSCs support as a burden to be passed on to the universities, without preparing the latter for assuming financial responsibility.



# PARADOXES AND CONTRADICTIONS?

- The WS intellectual is a paradoxical figure as there is an evident disjunct between the intellectual-political project of WS and its institutionalization.
- Is WS more academic than feminist?
- How do WS academics face the institutional pulls and pressures?
- If WSCs or their academics 'speak truth to power', they risk direct and indirect attack on almost all aspects of their operations, and moreover, their tenuous but hard-won place in the Indian academy.
- When academics from within these WSCs act strategically or for their own gain, by not challenging the university's own configuration as bureaucratic, hierarchical, and discriminatory, they find themselves at risk of losing their feminist edge, and in turn the support of feminist collectives.

# IMPORTANT QUESTIONS FOR WS

- How do we deal with the pulls and pressures of research and teaching vs extension work and advocacy?
- Do certain knowledges in WS have hegemony over others?
- How do we understand “sanctioned ignorances” within scholars from ‘different’ concerns, contexts and geo-epistemological locations?
- Who gets to become a WS scholar and then WS academic?

# HOW TO CONCLUDE IN THE FACE OF UNCERTAINTY?

- The draft guidelines for WSCs (2019) charge them to “help India achieve her UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of Promoting Equality and Empowerment of Women”.
- Levi and Rothstein (2018) caution that if universities have to shoulder their role as key drivers of the SDGs, one of them being SDG5, they should start by looking at themselves first.
- With the support for the institutionalisation of WSCs from all quarters having eroded in the current crisis, how can the constitutional and SDG obligation to women’s equality continue to hold a priority position for universities?
- What happens to the long-fought feminist dreams of transformative agency within the academy, during constraining times in India and in higher education globally?

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