

Workshop Reports



Summer School in Women's Studies in Hyderabad, India

S. ANANDHI, KALPANA KANNABIRAN
and MEERA VELAYUDHAN

The Summer School in Women's Studies was conducted by the Indian Association of Women's Studies and Asmita Resource Centre for Women, Secunderabad from 10 March to 10 April 1997 at the National Institute for Small Industries Extension and Training, Hyderabad. The date of commencement of the course is significant: 10 March 1997 marks the death centenary of Savitribai Phule, the pioneer in women's education.

Designed as an interdisciplinary effort, the curriculum locates the issue of violence historically, in different regions, in varied contexts, and in relation to literature, economic policies, environment, caste, class, ethnicity, identity, health and media. The interconnectedness of these diverse areas/disciplines was introduced through a session on the 'Social Construction of Gender' which included introductions to concepts of dominance, hegemony and patriarchy cross-culturally. The resource persons who spent two days with participants had complete flexibility in approaching their disciplines/areas of concern and in structuring their sessions. In structuring the entire course and the overall curriculum and reading list, we created the possibility and

S. Anandhi, Kalpana Kannabiran, Meera Velayudhan, ASMITA Resource Centre for Women, House No. 45, Road No. 2, West Marredpalli, Secunderabad 500 026, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Gender, Technology and Development 2(1), 1998
Sage Publications, New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London

space for this flexibility in ways that enhanced not only the potential of that space but also the comprehension of the students.

The group, consisting of 19 students, came from very diverse backgrounds, mostly from regional universities in the south and from non-English speaking backgrounds. The group was also representative of unevenness in our educational system, and the participants were not equipped by their formal education to deal with the reading material they were given. However many of the participants had some experience in NGOs, women's groups and political groups in Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu in addition to their university degrees. In the course of one month, however, every participant had learnt to read, to interlink readings, to make linkages between readings and political reality and to help each other plough through difficult and complex material.

Those invited for guest lectures included Neera Desai, Vasanth Kannabiran, Jasodhara Bagchi, U. Vindhya, Ammu Joseph, Gabriele Dietrich, Srilatha Batliwala, Maithreyi Krishnaraj, Padmini Swaminathan, Uma Chakravarti, Kumari Jayawardena, Rama Melkote, Ritu Menon and Kumud Pawde. Alongside the sessions with the group, we used this opportunity to open up a more visible space for women's studies in the public arena. We did this by organizing public lectures by each of the resource persons under an overarching theme 'Challenges to Women's Studies.' While the attendance at the lectures was far from satisfactory, a one-month Public Lecture Series was organized for the first time ever and it created a platform for dialogue for anyone who was interested and had the time. And each one of the lectures was extremely thought-provoking.

The schedule for the one-month residential course included two hours of classroom lectures each day by resource persons from different disciplines, followed by tutorials, discussions, group presentations and seminars on specific themes:

- the relationship of women's studies to the women's movement
- the relevance of an understanding of violence in women's studies
- memory, violence, resistance in women's writings
- ideology, representation, violence and gender in the mass media
- the science question in feminism
- understanding feminist historiography
- feminist critiques of economic theory

The significant elements in the manner in which the course had been structured was:

1. The resource persons invited to deliver the lectures are pioneers in women's studies and in incorporating gender concerns within disciplines and are also active in the women's movement and in popular mass movements. Their lectures, therefore, foregrounded the importance of an interdisciplinary feminist perspective and its necessary linkages with politics.
2. The readings for specific disciplines/areas were compiled in consultation with the resource persons, while the main body was identified and selected by the coordinators keeping in mind the objectives and conceptualization of the course. A total of 150 articles in different disciplines from diverse regions across the world were identified for the course and distributed to participants in eight parts. Apart from this, a makeshift library with a collection of at least 200 women's studies texts and 30 video films on women's issues were made available for reference on the campus.
3. The participants formed themselves into three groups: Anveshana, Manavi, Chetana. They took turns chairing the classroom lectures, moderating discussions, and constituted a committee to look into any issues concerning interpersonal relations, logistics, accommodation, food, etc.
4. Readings and discussions were conducted within these groups and the group dynamics involved overcoming/addressing issues of class, caste, region, language, personality traits, in addition to studying and understanding the course material together. The primary objective of these group readings and presentations was to transform the individual experience of reading and researching into a collective one by encouraging and facilitating interpersonal relations among the participants from diverse academic and social backgrounds through sharing knowledge and developing reflective skills. In keeping with this objective, the reading materials were grouped and classified thematically as well as discipline-wise to enable each participant to acquire interdisciplinary learning skills and develop an interdisciplinary resource base.

In their reflections on the Summer School Process, participants wrote about the unevenness of the educational system, the state of

women's studies in India, the class, caste, regional variations. They wrote that the school had

- strengthened their understanding of the dimensions of gender, its interrelations with class, caste, religion, community;
- revealed in a stark manner political aspects of violence;
- created an awareness that the significance of women's studies was not recognized by people within the university and the need to work in this area;
- provided the tools to link field experience with feminist theory;
- helped individual research both in terms of broadening understanding as well as making research more meaningful;
- enabled the participants to acquire perspectives on feminism and women's movement, in understanding concepts like patriarchy and gender relations;
- enabled them to critically evaluate their own caste and class locations and understand the concept of 'personal as political' in the context of multiple and competing identities.