

Eastern Region Seminar on *Feminism and the Production of Knowledge*
Indian Association of Women's Studies and
the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkatta
5th & 6th February 2007

This seminar, *Feminism and the Production of Knowledge*, was designed in response to interests expressed by young women's studies scholars in the eastern region, with a view to encouraging new scholarship in women's studies. Most of the academic papers were delivered by young college and university teachers, and researchers, from Jharkhand, Orissa and W.Bengal, while the presentations in the activists panels included both veterans as well as a dalit lawyer from Bihar. Approximately 65 people participated in the seminar. Some of the speakers had earlier attended refresher courses in women's studies at Jadavpur University, or had been students of the M.Phil programme of the School of Women's Studies. A central aim of the seminar was to promote self-reflection on how we produce knowledge within various areas of women's studies, what our modes of consolidating and disseminating knowledge are, and to what purpose they are geared. Also in focus were questions of how to approach the vast variety of women's oral histories and literary narratives across the cultural, regional and political differences. Nirmala Banerjee, a past president of the IAWS, chaired the inaugural session. Zarina Bhatti, past president and currently a member of the EC inaugurated the seminar, recounted a brief history of the IAWS and its activities.

Kumkum Sangari, whose scholarship has yielded some of the most critical theoretical insights for contemporary feminisms across the last two decades, delivered the keynote address. She argued that mere retrieval of women's voices is not enough; the retrieval should actually lead to changes in the terms of understanding literature and history. Also, early feminist claims of experience as the absolute foundation of knowledge now need to be nuanced. Experience is certainly generative of knowledge, but what the nature of that knowledge is needs to be considered carefully - for experience is an authenticating category for women who are oppressed, yet it is also ideological. Moreover, experience is aggregated to produce knowledge and establish the facticity of women's experience across countries--yet it also erases the particular and creates its own ideology. On the one hand is the fragility of voices, the marking of

boundaries, and on the other the grand totalizing design of a movement. Somewhere between these poles lies the work of feminist knowledge production. She concluded by cautioning against approaching misogyny in terms of continuity across history - to see it as merely a feudal remnant is to refuse to historicize specific acts of misogyny differently. The point is to focus on modes of regrouping, reconstituting, and reformulating through which the contemporary world is constituted.

Proyash Sircar, a teacher of philosophy, delivered a talk on feminist epistemology. He cautioned against attaching unique epistemic privilege to a standardized femininity, as that implies a total incommensurability between men's and women's perspectives and can only lead to isolationism.

Presentations were made under four sub-themes:

Women's Oral Narratives and Testimonial Writing

Retrieval of Women's Writings: Comparative Literary Studies

Gender Politics of Education

Activism, Experience and Knowledge

The presentations on Oral Narratives and Testimonial Writings focussed on various modes of generation and expression of women's knowledge, ranging from the Rajbongshi women of the Tista valley, to prison narratives of Naxalite women, to narratives of sexworkers in Kolkata and Delhi, and of those branded "witches" in Jharkhand. Comparative Literature scholars featured prominently in this seminar, reinforcing yet again the growing understanding of the common agendas and symbiotic relationship between Comparative Literature and Women's Studies in India, specially regarding concerns related to developing a comparative assessment of the state of women's creativity and perspectives across the linguistic, literary and political cultures of South Asia. The session on education included gendered analyses of textbooks as well as comic-books, as well as one that highlighted the limitations faced by women with disabilities in the process of knowledge production, and foregrounded the areas in which the women's movement as well as institutions of learning need to develop greater sensitivity to their needs.

In the sessions on activism, one presentation regarding appropriation of agricultural land for industry and SEZ's led to intense discussion, specially on the dilemma of the disjuncture between academic analyses and activism - that while we address the link between the transnational and the regional economically, we continue to act chiefly at the regional level, and politically. The interest generated by another presentation, by a dalit feminist lawyer from Jehanabad, Bihar, was also tremendous, but the dynamics of very different modes of interaction across the metropolitan academic and small-town activist divide brought home the need for more time and thoughtful structuring for such exchanges.

The seminar was organized jointly by Kavita Panjabi, Eastern Region Co-ordinator of the IAWS, and the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University.