



Newsletter

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IAWS

Indian Association
of Women's Studies

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Editor's Desk

The last few months have been marked by hectic activity. Five extremely successful regional workshops/seminars were conducted by the IAWS, in collaboration with local institutions, and we bring you reports of all these in this issue. In addition to the five regular regions – North, South, East, West and North-East – this IAWS EC had also demarcated a Central Region, to enable us to develop a special focus on this area of low membership. In keeping with this aim to reinforce our activities here, a one day workshop was also held in Amravati.. The North-Eastern Regional Workshop will be held in October.

Plans are afoot for the IAWS Silver Jubilee National Conference, for which these regional seminars/workshops were planned as a build-up. It is now slated for February 2008 in Lucknow. Mary John, our secretary, has already made one trip to Lucknow, and preparations are under way. This issue carries a note on this upcoming XIIth National Conference, along with a last call for sub-theme proposals. Members are urged to send in, by July 5th, 2007, proposals for sub-themes that they may wish to organize at the conference. A detailed brochure of the conference, including the sub-themes, will be sent out to all IAWS members later this year.

Another timely event to mark our 25th year was the inauguration of the IAWS Archives on March 14th, 2007 at the Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT Women's University Mumbai. Many thanks to our joint secretary, Kamala Ganesh, and her team for putting together the archives across months of dedicated work. As you know, our president Sumi Krishna has also been hard at work on the IAWS website, which was launched last year, and is now compiling a comprehensive web-archive. The best way of thanking her would be to respond immediately to her call for old documents, newsletter, and photographs!

And finally, many congratulations to our life member Ruth Manorama, for having been honoured with the Right Livelihood Award for 2006! It's a very well deserved recognition indeed of her undaunted work for the empowerment of Dalit women.

Kavita Panjabi: kavip@vsnl.com

IAWS WEB-ARCHIVE

<http://www.iaws.org/>

Call for old documents/ newsletters/ photographs

The IAWS web-archive is being developed with advice and technical support from the Centre for Education and Documentation, Bangalore, which has considerable experience in this field. The IAWS website already includes some archival material, such as the Presidential Addresses from the First National Conference in 1981. A more comprehensive web-archive is under construction. As a step in this direction, IAWS documents that are scattered in different institutions and with individuals across the country are being collected and digitised.

The first phase of digitising IAWS published materials has been completed. This includes 15 publications in English and Hindi, most of which are out of print. It also includes 17 newsletters starting from 1992, many of which are only available as single copies. Downloadable pdf versions of the last two newsletters (May 2006, Nov. 2006) are also now available on our website <http://www.iaws.org/>

Other materials including photographs and possibly some grey literature of archival importance will be digitised in the second phase, starting shortly. We would be very grateful if members who have copies of the early Conference brochures, Newsletters published before 1992 (i.e. prior to the summer/autumn issue No. 16-17), and any other relevant material could lend these to us for digitising.

Please contact **Sumi Krishna** by email <iawsresident@gmail.com> or phone 080-25200716. Or write to: #103, Farah Court; 185 Fifth Main, Defence Colony; Indira Nagar; Bangalore 560038.

Silver Jubilee National Conference in Lucknow

We are once again taking this opportunity to announce that plans have been initiated for the XIIth IAWS Conference. Some of you may be aware that the IAWS was born in September 1982, which means that the next year will be our Silver Jubilee as an Association. The upcoming Conference will therefore also be part of our Silver Jubilee celebrations, and we look forward to your participation in making this an enriching and stimulating occasion. The Conference has now been finalized to be held in Lucknow, U.P.. We are grateful that the Centre for Women's Studies at Lucknow University has shown great readiness in helping the IAWS to host the Conference. The proposed time for hosting the Conference is February 8-11 2008.

The issues, reflections and explorations of the Conference can be encapsulated in our current working title "**Feminism and the Production of Knowledges: Processes and Institutions**". We envisage this as an occasion both for taking stock of the extraordinary growth and development of women's studies as a field, and as a critical moment for raising new questions. Women's studies in India is possibly unique in its diversity, in the many forces that contributed to its emergence and subsequent growth, in its varied impact on the educational system, and in the role played by the women's movement in all of these. There is little doubt that the span of 25 years has witnessed a transformation in the world we live in, which in turn impacts upon how we inherit the legacies of women's studies and feminism today. Thus there are political, historical, generational and institutional dimensions to our celebration of 25 years. Among the different themes that we hope to explore are diverse feminisms, literacy and education, questions of autonomy and institutionalization, feminist methodologies, questions of marginality, women and science, women's studies and pedagogy, action research and extension, and so on.

Last call for Sub-Theme Proposals

Among the different themes that we hope to explore are diverse feminisms; feminist methodologies; questions of marginality; women and science; women's studies and pedagogy; comparative approaches to knowledges; gender, men and feminism; institutions; the media; economics and work; literature and culture; political processes; family and social life; strategies for activism; and the relation of extension work to research. Proposals are invited from members for possible sub-themes that would address these or related issues, which must be received by us by July 5th, 2006, at the IAWS Central Office or at iawsgsec@gmail.com.

A more detailed announcement with full details of the Conference will be sent from the Secretariat to all members later in 2007.

IAWS Western Regional Workshop *Archiving Women's Lives: Perspectives and Techniques*

Organised by the IAWS and the Dept of Sociology, University of Mumbai
19th & 20th January, 2007

Every seminar has an 'origin story'. The idea of this workshop came up when we at the EC were mulling (as indeed had several previous ECs) over how to manage the huge mass of IAWS papers and documents accumulated over a quarter century. The 'moving secretariat', the outcome of the IAWS general body's consistent commitment to de-centralise and de-hierarchise, had the inevitable fall-out of having to transport huge cardboard boxes stuffed with papers to wherever the secretary was located. The papers had to be weeded out and made more compact, the important ones for running the organisation separated out and those relevant for charting a history of women's studies in India archived. As we engaged with this task concretely, we realized the need to learn more on the what, why and how of retrieval, selection and archiving with a gendered perspective. The topic had not been explored much, but was a widespread felt need and moreover dovetailed with our larger interest in the theme of Women and Knowledge Production for the forthcoming national conference at Lucknow.

Objectives

Derrida reminds us in his 'Archive Fever' that "the archive is not simply a recording, a reflection, an image of the event. It shapes the event. The archivization produces as much as it records the event." Recent social science scholarship, particularly feminist and historical, has expanded, nuanced and democratised our understanding of an archive.

The workshop aimed to provide a space for discussion in the context of three contemporary trends: i) critique from feminist historians on the need to address and redress the absence of women in accounts of history ii) newer approaches within history and other social sciences that privilege alternative sources, and search consciously for activities and expressions of subaltern groups iii) explosion of innovative techniques and technology for retrieval, preservation and archiving. It aimed to create a dialogue on combining gendered perspectives with informed choices of technology, based on need and relevance.

Participants

The workshop attracted a large number of participants of diverse composition: college teachers, post graduate and research students and faculty from the social science and humanities from Mumbai University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, SNDT's Research Centre for Women's Studies, Maharashtra State Abhyas Vyaspeeth, members of NGOs and

women's organizations. It was noteworthy that staff from Godrej Archives, Ackworth Leprosy Hospital Archives, Bapu Trust Archives in addition to feminist archives and documentation centres attended. Senior members and past office bearers of IAWS like Neera Desai, Rohini Gawankar, Usha Thakkar, Chhaya Datar, Veena Poonacha were present, as were some of the current EC members. There were 85 participants on the first day and 70 on the second.

Workshop Structure and Content

The resource persons at the one and a half day workshop included artistes, film makers and film technologists in addition to academics from history, anthropology, women's studies, and sociology, documentalists, archivists and women from grass roots organizations.

A special feature was that a deliberate attempt was made to break the distinction between 'work' and 'entertainment'. The cultural programmes held outside the business sessions did not merely enliven and relax the participants, but had been planned to flow from and into the content and concerns of the workshop. Ideas presented in the papers got vividly and concretely illustrated in these programmes which were furthermore open to all. Thus, just before the start of the workshop, the CWDS exhibition of photographs: '*Representing Indian Women 1875 to 1947: A Visual Documentary*' was inaugurated by eminent theatre and film actor **Rohini Hattangady** and it was on throughout the duration of the workshop. Besides the workshop participants, it attracted many students, as the visitors book testifies. On the first evening, a music programme by noted Hindustani vocalist **Sandhya Kathavate** titled '*Sun Ree Sakhi: Women's songs, Women's Voice*' subtly raised issues of authorship and representation while providing a melodious listening experience. Within the workshop structure too, almost all presentations used audio and visual media: a distinct change from the 'chalk and talk' approach typical of the university ambience.

Three presentations – by **Malavika Karlekar**, **Geraldine Forbes** and **Veena Poonacha** – were about the medium of photographs: how to source, preserve and read them. They covered a range of issues from gendered experiments in recovering the history of a whole era, to that of individual families, and about the pitfalls in assuming that what you see can be interpreted directly. Two papers were on music. **Denise Nuttall** interrogated the classical tradition of tabla which conferred public recognition

only on males although female kin of the ustads had their own repository of knowledge and skills in this domain . **Sejal Dand** narrated an experiment by the NGO ANANDI in partnering tribal women in Devgad in creating and recording songs of their experiences of cultural subordination and of empowerment through organizing themselves. She played the songs and explained their content and their making. Artist and film maker **Pushpamala** showed her film *Rashtriy Kheer and Desi Salad* and talked about how an innocent family diary with recipes scrawled on it triggered a thought trail in her about the hiatus between, as well as the knitting together of masculine and feminine worlds in the first flush of Indian independence in the 50s.

Concrete experiences of women’s organisations in documenting and archiving – hurdles, pitfalls and hands on (re)solutions – were discussed in the paper by **Mita Parikh** and **Shivani Thaker** of SEWA as well as in the subsequent panel discussion by **Divya Pande** (SPARROW), **Sharada Sathe** (STREE MUKTI SANGHATANA), **Sonal Shukla** (VACHA) and **Hansa Thapliyal** (MAJLIS).

The experiences and perspectives of archiving by organisations not especially focussed on gender were also included. **Arvind Ganachari** described the nitty gritty of ploughing through and gleaning insights from the National and Maharashtra State Archives; **Ratula Dutta** spoke of her work in collaboration with **Indira Chowdhury** in creating an archives for Tata Institute of Fundamental Research; **Amanda Padamsee** and **Vinod Kumar** spoke on the work of Centre for Education and Documentation, which while gender sensitive, has a whole range of concerns. **Neil Sadwelkar** filled in the audience on digitisation and other new technologies, about terminology, techniques, costs, shelf life, and a host of other issues.

Issues and Outcomes

The sessions had lively discussions in which ‘selectivity’ and ‘representation’ featured prominently, as issues whose significance is undiminished even with non-conventional sources. Another recurring concern was that of access to technology, its cost, and most importantly, to what purpose it could and should be deployed. The conventional separation of spheres between social scientists/ historians and archivists/ technologists got questioned, but it was revealing that at a subterranean level, it sometimes continued to inform assumptions. Given this, it was perhaps inevitable that the workshop did not resolve the above issues in a concerted manner, but ended on a tentative note of having brought together a variety of actors and stakeholders on one platform and triggered a dialogue.

For the organisers, it was gratifying to get feedback from participants that the proceedings were informative, lively and thought provoking; that they had learnt something new; that they had not previously thought of this subject in this manner; that they now felt less intimidated by technology. “I will now look anew at my family photographs and letters” was one comment, which made our day.

Specifically, by way of ‘usable’ outcomes

1. The IAWS silver jubilee conference is on the broad theme of Women and Knowledge production, and a plenary on retrieving and creating gendered historical knowledge is a definite possibility.

2. The workshop’s approach of mixing ‘cultural programmes’ and ‘business sessions’ in content and format worked well, and furnishes an innovative format for the silver jubilee conference.

Acknowledgements

The workshop was co-sponsored by IAWS and the Dept. of Sociology, University of Mumbai. The coordinators were Kamala Ganesh, Professor, Department of Sociology and joint secretary of the IAWS and Gita Chadha, Lecturer in Sociology, Russell Square International College, Mumbai. Unnati Tripathi, who is presently preparing an inventory of the IAWS documents with a view to archiving and digitising, assisted in organising the workshop. Rapporteurship was done by post graduate students of Sociology, viz., Sampada Pai, Manish Sharma and Sameer Talati. Jawaharal Nehru Library of the University of Mumbai graciously provided exhibition space and the Kavivarya Kusumagraj Marathi Bhasha Bhavan, the concert space. ICSSR provided the conference space and other related amenities.

Kamala Ganesh (IAWS Jt. Secretary and Western Region Coordinator) with inputs from Gita Chadha and Unnati Tripathi.
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IAWS Central Regional Workshop *Lingbhav Jadan-Ghadan aani Bharatiya Streevad (The concept of Gender and Indian Feminism)*

**Organized by the IAWS and
Sant Gadgebaba Amravati Vidhyapeeth, Amravati
19th February, 2007**

The Central Regional Workshop titled as Lingbhav Jadan-ghadan aani Bharatiya Streevad (The concept of gender and Indian feminism) was organised by the Women Lecturer’s Association, Sant Gadgebaba Amravati Vidhyapeeth, Amravati on 19th February 2007. This was part of an attempt to increase the activity of the IAWS in the Central Region.

Keynote by Pushpa Bhawe. Sessions on Marxist feminism, Ambedkarite feminism and feminism of the marginalised (i.e. tribals).

Nisha Shinde (IAWS Central Regional Co-ordinator)

IAWS Southern Regional Workshop

Feminist Perspectives and the Struggle to Transform the Disciplines

Organised by the IAWS and the Women's Studies Department, United Theological College, Bangalore
2nd & 3rd February, 2007

The Southern Regional Workshop on 'Feminist Perspectives and the Struggle to Transform the Disciplines' was attended by over 65 academics, practitioners and activists from Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Background materials, draft papers/ power point presentations were circulated before the workshop, contributing to lively interactions by an informed group. Participants decided to continue networking and work towards concretising methodological issues related to interdisciplinary research. The workshop proceedings including the papers/ presentations etc. will be available on CD. For the detailed report see Documents at <http://www.iaws.org/menu.html>

Introductory

The Rev. Dr. O.V. Jathanna, Principal UTC, greeted the participants. Dr. Lalrinawmi (Rini) Ralte, Chairperson Women's Studies Department, UTC, described the evolution of the Women's Studies Programme within UTC. Introducing the workshop, IAWS President Sumi Krishna asked: a) what is the challenge that feminism poses to various disciplines; b) what are the institutional and systemic obstacles to change; and c) how should we mobilise for change? In her Opening Remarks, Dr. Devaki Jain, founder and former Director of the Institute for Social Studies Trust, discussed the 'problematiques' of identity and theorising. Feminist discourse was politically disturbing because fields of study had to change in multiple ways. Knowledge outlived practice but women's theorising had been marked by *neti-neti*, seeking definition by negation. She argued for drawing on women's collective *gyana* (both experiential and intellectual).

Sociology; Economics

Dr. Carol Upadhyaya, Associate Prof of Sociology, National Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) Bangalore, outlined the 'intersections, injections and iterations' in the relationship between feminism and sociology, in the West and India. Feminist methodology is political but sociology seeks to be academic and 'value-neutral'. In India, the sociology of gender and Women's Studies (WS) has been marginalised among mainstream disciplines; the extensive transformation that occurred in the West has not happened and there are several unresolved issues. Participants felt this resonates with the situation in economics and science; WS itself may lack a critical feminist perspective. Yet, students from non-dominant groups have influenced sociology's research agendas and methodologies.

Dr. Ratna Kumari, Associate Prof. of Economics, Andhra University, Vishakapatnam, surveyed the efforts to bring feminist perspectives into economics in India. She asked

whether the fundamentals of economic theory could be changed. Dr. T. Jyothi Rani, Professor of Economics, Kakatiya University, Warangal, described the struggle in 1989 to introduce a Masters paper 'Economics of Women's Studies', the first such in Andhra. Participants said that the historical tracing of gender bias challenged fundamental macro-economic models. Concepts of 'public goods' and the 'care economy' should become part of mainstream economics; there was need to take a class position on women's identity rather than talk of gender in generic terms.

Psychology; Public Health

Discussing the impact of feminism on psychology in India, Prof. U Vindhya, Convener, Dr. Durgabai Deshmukh Centre for Women's Studies, Andhra University, said psychology, the science of 'individual adjustment', was a conservative discipline compared to feminism, the destabilising voice of the collective. Academic studies focus uncritically on the work-family linkage, seeing women as 'deficient'; the bio-medical model dominates clinical psychology. But current researches by NGOs/ advocacy groups have a cross-disciplinary, critical perspective on women's lived experience. Dr. Sundari Ravindran, Honorary Prof., Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies, Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences and Technology (SCTIMST), Thiruvananthapuram, spoke of SCTIMST's initiative to integrate gender into the curricula of public health professionals. Because of the sexist bias in the construction of medical knowledge, the male is the norm and women's health issues are ignored. 'Mainstreaming' requires moving beyond critiques to create alternative solutions, 'dilution and compromise'. Development practitioner Shoba Raja, Director of Basic Needs, said the organisation has a vast data on mental illness but needs help in analysing this. The evidence suggests that gender and poverty influence women's mental health, dehumanising them. Gender blindness in policy is mirrored by the neglect of mental health, resources for treatment, livelihood opportunities etc. As there is no policy critique, the government is under no pressure to change. Participants pointed out that linkages were being developed between psychoanalysis and feminism but psychology seemed resistant to integration into the social sciences; its normative content has remained the heterosexual family; there is a big gap between academic psychology and NGO research on poverty, mental health and gender; and the take-over of psychological concepts by management studies emphasises the status quo, raising issues of medical ethics.

Natural Science, Agriculture; Veterinary Science

Discussing the gendered content of the natural science disciplines, independent Bangalore-based researcher Sumi

Krishna said feminist critique of natural/life sciences is almost entirely missing in India. Gender-bias was embedded in metaphors, classificatory systems and theory resulting in the enduring narratives of the 'passive female'/'active male' in embryology; 'man the hunter' in anthropology; and the 'genetic man' in molecular biology. Indian scientists have been influenced by sociobiological assumptions that gender roles and behaviour are determined by biology/genetics. Participants said that the 'outdated' and faulty functional explanations of sociobiology had migrated from the social sciences to the sciences; gender-biased belief systems and attitudes were also internalised by women; upper caste women shared notions of merit being a matter of DNA.

In a case study from Mizoram, Dr. Rini Ralte, Chairperson, Department of Women's Studies, UTC, spoke of land being the sacred 'centre of the community' under the stewardship of the village Chief. Women's knowledge, associated with traditional animistic faiths, was dismissed by Christianity. Economic development altered the land system and forest economy. The close-knit community spirit was deeply patriarchal and allied to rising capitalist forces. Without a role in decision-making, women cannot voice food security concerns; oppressive Customary Laws need to be changed. In another case study of two agro-biodiversity rich areas in the Eastern Ghats of Tamil Nadu and Orissa, Dr. R. Rengalakshmi, senior agricultural scientist, MS Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai, said changes in agricultural production systems have caused changes in gender roles, responsibilities and knowledge. Interventions to strengthen agro-biodiversity conservation had found that the value of women's knowledge depended on the demand for it, which was clearly linked to the rise or fall in production of particular crops. Women's agro-biodiversity knowledge contributes to equitable gender relations only when this is 'needed, enhanced and recognised'. Hyderabad-based veterinary doctor and development activist Dr. Sagari Ramdas, cofounder-director of the NGO ANTHRA, spoke of the inter-linkages between gender, livestock and livelihoods. Science and technology are not politically or gender neutral. ANTHRA has fought the 'derecognition of women's knowledge' and for keeping the larger political framework in mind. For the women, farming and livestock activities were one but are separated in the formal system. Animal husbandry has become a medical science rather than a livelihood activity. The veterinary extension system has collapsed and technical research is driven by globalisation. Participants discussed women's livelihoods, organic farming methods, and the need for interdisciplinary research, an 'empowerment framework' for interventions and strengthening feminism with a political perspective.

Cultural Studies; Dalit Studies

Dr. Tejaswani Niranjana, Director, Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore, speaking on 'Women Studies and Cultural Studies' (CS) said CS preceded WS in the West but feminism was 'foundational' in Asia. WS in India had contributed to the 'rupturing of the disciplines' enabling inter-

disciplinary scholarship and the emergence of CS. These were not clearly outlined disciplines, rather ways of approaching a problem area. Asia's colonial history led to CS being encompassed by the discourse on nationalism and modernity. Nationalist movements created a fixed position for women in culture. The New and the Modern Woman were differentiated, privileging the New Woman. Participants raised questions about the influence of post-modernity in CS, whether the interdependency between CS and WS was organic and mutually beneficial, and the changing interests of younger women, regarding patriarchy and gender studies as a discipline.

Approaching cultural issues from the perspective of Dalit Studies, Professor Maya Pandit, Central Institute for English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL), Hyderabad, talked about 'Dalit autobiographies and integrating difference'. She said Dalit autobiographies are rather 'socio-biographies', testimonies that reveal an interplay of various theories, a fractured modernity and the lived experience of difference. The idea of resistance is significant and needs to be read as emancipatory politics. Dalit feminism involves a three-fold critique of the feminist, Dalit and Left movements, exposing the limitations of each. A. Suneetha, Coordinator, Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad, said Anveshi was concerned with the implications of the normative woman-family-relationship that underlies policymaking in reproductive health, mental health, family/criminal law and education, and how these ideals erased/shaped the caste of the subject in policy formulation and implementation. Another concern was how the legal and institutional reforms suggested by the women's movements were cognizant of caste. G. Shyamala's political biography of respected mainstream Dalit politician M. Sadalakshmi establishes that the Dalit woman's identity is not that of a victim but of an autonomous leader. Participants discussed issues of culture, identity, and celebrating difference. The 'touchable tales' of Dalit women seemed to have moved away from the *neti-neti* (not this-not this) approach. Dalit women's voices expressed the embedded self; this politics of difference needs to be recognised but not ghettoised.

Minority Studies; Theology

Theatre activist A. Mangai (V. Padma), who teaches English literature at Stella Maris College, Chennai, discussed the little known 2nd century BC poetry compendium *Therigatha*. Compiled in Pali by elder Buddhist nuns (*theri*), the verses speak ironically of the patriarchal division of labour, reflect the ideas of 'thinking' women, and reinterpret the body in amazingly graphic imagery rooted in everyday experience. Their early feminist assertion and spiritual quest for an alternative to Brahmanical patriarchy is significant for today's feminist discourse. *Therigatha's* liberative potential as a religious philosophy could serve to build an alternative feminist perspective to counter religious fundamentalism. Feminist activist D. Sherifa, founder and President of STEPS, an organisation concerned with violence against women, described the Muslim women's *jamaat* in Tamil Nadu, literally a 'gathering'. Starting from the small town of Pudukottai, the

women's *jamaat* now extends to 22 districts. A brief video clip on the movement showed that the women's *jamaat* has a vision of gender justice that derives from their day-to-day experience and understanding. The *jamaat* enables women to express their rights, take decisions and find solutions within the framework of their faith. The women are also building their own mosque in Pudukottai.

The Rev. Dr. Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, WSC, UTC, Bangalore, spoke of 'faith and ideology' from the lens of her experience of teaching feminist theology. Sharing her own initiatives to change the tradition by introducing new patterns in the Christian liturgy, she described how feminist perspectives were challenging the overall system of Christian theology. By introducing WS into the main curriculum of the theological seminary, some centres of theological learning have succeeded in introducing future pastors and theologians, mainly men, to gender concerns. Feminist theology also addresses the class, caste and gender nexus of society, facilitating reflection on women's everyday life experience. Asked about the liberative dimensions of feminist Biblical scholarship and people's reactions to the initiatives in subverting existing rituals, she responded that it is important to underline the hermeneutical principle, which is to affirm the full humanity of women in theory and praxis.

Public Discourse: Documentation; Translation

Prof. Katyayani Vidmahe, who heads the Women's Studies Department, Kakatiya University, Warrangal, said the influence of WS on Telugu literature began with the Marxist and women's movements in Andhra but literary theory still draws upon ancient theories that undermine women. The incompleteness of Bharata's *rasa* theory, considered the basis of all aesthetics, is evident in the *Shringara rasa* that excludes the feelings, emotions and desires of women. Women's sexuality was seen as threatening the sacred concept of the family and patriarchal lineage and inheritance. *Rasa* theory is still taught uncritically in the academy and influences students' perceptions and public discourse. In a lively interchange, participants said *rasa* theory should be seen in the context of the *Natya Shastra* as a whole, the exclusion of all non-Brahmanic art forms and the destruction of theatrical spaces. The 'grammar of performance' was not just codification and needs to be de-mythologised in the public sphere today.

Bangalore-based development activist-writer Shubha Chacko, talked of 'other ways of knowing' and her experience of setting up and running an alternative documentation centre at the National Law School of India University, which typically comprised of upper class and caste faculty and students. In the era of the information revolution, the internet organises information in ways that prioritise certain sites, and the space of public libraries is being taken away under WTO treaties. A 'people-oriented' documentation centre makes available information from 'smaller' micro sources like people's movements. Maintaining an alternative space, focusing on

social justice, is a political challenge, a venture into the unknown. Historian Dr. J. Devika, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvanthapuram, spoke about translating feminism into public discourse. In hindsight, it was apparent that there is no 'homolingual address'. In Kerala, in the 1980s, feminists drew upon feminist theory in the English language. The most popular translation of 'feminism' in Malayalam is *streevadam* (literally 'argument on behalf of women'). The political force of an idea sometimes required coining new terms like *garhika adhvanam* (domestic labour) that she used instead of the simpler *veettupani* (housework) that the Communists preferred. There was need for more grounded translation in the task of creating feminist language. Participants said using local languages was an ethical issue. Researchers were grappling with the articulation of women's concerns about health to influence policy and public discourse. Language and translation were important in communicating to a younger generation. Non-faithful translation was subversive. Alternative forms of documentation and language created a platform, spaces that were central to agitational politics.

Issues and Challenges

There were many resonances in the diverse experiences of research, interventions and activism that were shared, reflected upon and analysed. Feminist perspectives have unpacked gender bias across several disciplines and forced a rethinking of certain concepts and methods. Yet, 'core assumptions' (e.g. concepts of the 'rational man' and the bio-medical model) have not been influenced by the critical perspective of feminism. Feminist ways of knowing are political, subversive and destabilising. 'New' disciplines do provide alternative interdisciplinary ways of approaching problem areas. But the tensions between feminist research methodology and conventional methodologies have not been resolved. Mobilising outside the academy has created alternative spaces for new kinds of research. The assertions of Dalit and Minority women also reflect ways of reconfiguring knowledge and influencing public discourse. Furthering a critical feminist perspective and creating such spaces within the formal system, however, requires compromise. Feminism itself does not speak in one voice, the politics of language and 'difference' poses difficult conceptual and methodological challenges. The cooption and vocationalising of WS and its move away from academic activism has to be understood in the context of students' legitimate aspirations. For Women's Studies/ Gender Studies the challenge is to retain the oppositional radical edge while negotiating for spaces at the levels of policy, research and education. The task is difficult because while there is considerable clarity of analysis in defining the problem, the way forward to the goal of gender justice is less clearly defined.

Sumi Krishna (IAWS President and Southern Regional Coordinator) with inputs from Suparna Kar and session rapporteurs.

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IAWS Eastern Regional Seminar
Feminism and the Production of Knowledge
Organised by the IAWS & School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata
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. Presentations were made under four sub-themes. Most of the academic papers were delivered by young college and university teachers, and researchers, from Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal, while the presentations in the activists panels included both veterans as well as a Dalit lawyer from Bihar. Approximately sixty five 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 began by discussing the dual roles of feminists, as activists and producers of academic knowledge, and observed that in both these roles we have made the attempt to retrieve unrepresented, lost voices—in riots, in rapes, or voices of women from the past. Yet, she argued, the retrieval of past writing is not just a feminist project; it is also a post-colonial activity; so mere retrieval is not enough; the retrieval should actually lead to changes in the terms of understanding literature and history. Discussing the category of experience, she emphasized that it is both contextual and ideological – it is neither entirely pre-ideological nor entirely ideological. 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. Literature is marked by a tension between individual experience and generic requirement – so individual experience gets filtered through the ideology of the genre, which is why in women's voices there is an element of the generic, not just a “pure” woman's voice. In the context of testimonial literature, on the other hand, the repetition of testimonies generates feminist activist knowledge. 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. When a woman speaks, who is it that speaks? The fine nuances between the voices of individual agency and those of the collective/ideological need close attention; this in turn can enable considerations of collectives in renewed ways. There is also a need to know how, despite the difficulty of finding a voice, despite the tenuousness of the individual's position, a standpoint emerges, and we finally have the production of a world view. 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. Addressing the pervasiveness of intermediary orality and the need for a gendered framework for understanding the relations between orality and writing, Kumkum concluded with observations about the language of misogyny. She cautioned against approaching misogyny in terms of continuity across history, or as just a feudal remnant—to see it, as some feminists have, as merely a feudal remnant is to refuse to historicize specific acts of misogyny differently. The point is to find ways of circumventing the old arguments about continuity and 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 and dealt with the role of gendered subjectivity in the construction of knowledge. He argued that while a denial of women's epistemic privilege on grounds of their positioning in society would turn the very concept of a feminist epistemology into a non-starter, yet the claim that women have a unique perspective, open only to those who share that unique location, leads to a new form of closure and tends to standardize femininity. Thus 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.

Women's Oral Narratives and Testimonial Writing

There were two sessions under this sub-theme, relating to various modes of generation and expression of women's knowledge. The first one was chaired by Ratnabali Chattopadhyay, retired professor of Islamic History and Culture, Calcutta University, and had Kavita Panjabi as discussant, while Janaki Nair, a historian at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata, doubled as chair and discussant for the second one. Epshita Halder, a Ph.D scholar, analysed performances of Rajbongshi women of the Tista valley, demonstrating how the performance not only becomes the space of an alternative knowledge about the river, but also presents

this knowledge as less-hierarchized, and more contingent than dominant knowledge systems. Sarmistha Dattagupta and Swati Ganguly, reading prison narratives of Naxalite women, argued that these testimonies evolved both in response to and reaction against the “gendered character and the entrenched patriarchal nature” of the new wave of radical Left politics of the late 1960’s as well as the Naxal movement’s elitist, intellectual, bourgeois programme of ‘giving politics’ to the subaltern subject, to narratives of sexworkers in Kolkata and Delhi, and of those branded “witches” in Jharkhand. Seemantini Gupta, a journalist and teacher of Comparative Literature, analysed sexworkers’ representations of self and their perspectives on society and politics, with a focus on specific structurings of their narratives, as well as the significance of their repetitions, silences and contradictions. Her work is aimed at creating a political space for women sexworkers’ perspectives within the social and literary constructions of knowledge ; Subbulaxmi Nandi, a member of Anandi, Gujarat, who had done comparative work on women branded as “witches” in Gujarat and Jharkhand, claimed that though two states (Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh) in India have anti-witch-hunting legislation, the enforcement is far from adequate. Emphasizing that the injustice, hurt, insult and subjugation of the “dakans” necessitates sensitive case handling, she elaborated upon the more concerted and focused action needed for broad-based advocacy and lobbying for anti-witch-hunting legislation across the country.

Sujata Guha, a scientist, and now a Ph.D researcher in women’s studies dealt with the tradition of Ayurveda and its denigration of women. Asserting that oral cultures allow far more fluidity and subtlety than do written ones, and also accommodate changes in concepts across context, time and gender, she speculated on the conceptual transformations ayurveda in women’s oral cultures. Arup Das, researcher and activist with Marfat, a voluntary organisation working on rights of children, drew upon oral narratives of women bidi workers of Murshidabad. He held that in a context where women and girls form over 75% of the workforce, and are severely exploited yet almost non-existent in the labour unions, it is imperative to develop a process to counter the exploitative mechanism and hegemonic principles that shape their lives; and it is through continuous engagement with women’s narratives that it may be possible to understand their perspectives and evolve some means of bringing about change. Analysing the conversations among bidi workers during their routine 8-10 hrs. (3-4 hrs. at a stretch) of bidi rolling in groups, he elaborated how these are very different from the known genre of Loka Sahitya or Bratakatha performed by women in groups and how “*each story allows everyone to define herself*”. Sabita Acharya, an anthropologist from Utkal University, drew upon oral narratives and life stories of women of the Munda tribe from different parts of Orissa to explore their perceptions of the difficulties of adjusting to modernization, as well as of the nature of their consequent marginalization.

Retrieval of Women’s Writings: Comparative Literary Studies

Comparative Literature scholars featured prominently in this session, 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 was chaired by Amiya Dev, retired professor of Comparative Literature, and the discussant was Shubha Dasgupta, a feminist scholar and also a professor of Comparative Literature. Subrata Mishra, a teacher of Political Science from Sambalpur University, focusing on women’s standpoints and contribution to feminist knowledge, compared the narratives of Annapurna Maharana and Sumani Jhodia, the former an upper-class activist of the freedom struggle and other social movements, and the latter a tribal woman from an impoverished and marginalized background. Ritu Sen Chowdhury, a teacher of English at Mahishadal College discussed the figuration of the woman as constituted by Nationalist ideology. She read the autobiography of Sarala Debi, one of the first women leaders of the Indian Nationalist movement in nineteenth century Bengal, to understand how she acquired subjecthood even as she was simultaneously susceptible to the normative order that shaped her subjectivity. A comparative reading of Pandita Ramabai’s narrative added critical depth to this presentation. Soma Mukherjee, a Ph.D scholar in Comparative Literature, explored the writings of Ashapura Devi and Shivani, analyzing their perspectives on the ways in which the influence of modernity brought a gradual change in their respective societies and value systems.

Rukmini Sen, a lecturer in sociology at the West Bengal National University of Juridical Sciences, focussed on comparative perspectives of Partition in the west and the east, and analysed the ways in which women narrate conflict. Her nuanced discussion included questions such as whether women construct themselves as active agents participating in the conflicts or as passive victims of situations and if there is an understanding of state and nation-building in these narratives or whether they are just personal expressions of grief. Nilanjana Bhattacharya, a Ph.D scholar in Comparative Literature, delivered a paper on testimonies and autobiographies of Dalit women like Chuni Kotal and Krishna Lodh as well as women activists of the Telengana movement and the Janajuddha, assessing how these narratives contribute to the development of feminist scholarship. She highlighted the parallels in the nature of exploitation of activists with those who were not politically active, such as Chuni Kotal and Krishna Lodh, and explored the differences in their modes of resistance.

Gender Politics of Education

Chaired by Paromita Chakravarti, Joint Director of SWS, Jadavpur University, this session had Barnita Bagchi of the Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata as a discussant. Srirupa Sengupta of Jadavpur University and Aliva Mohanty, SWS, Utkal University, Orissa, spoke directly about gender bias in text books. While Mohanty's paper attempted a wide survey of gender prejudices in teacher-student relationships, learning environment and teaching material and suggested broad and general recommendations to overcome these problems, Sengupta's paper focused specifically on history text-books from the primary and secondary levels in West-Bengal. She argued that instead of making cosmetic and tokenistic inclusions of women there was a need to conceive of a disciplinary change. The limited nature of the militaristic or dynastic history often taught in schools would never do justice to the work and achievements of women who had largely remained outside the purview of power. We need to focus more on cultural and social history to capture more honestly the silent labour of women (and other subaltern classes) and their contributions to historical processes. Shampa Sengupta, Disability Rights activist, spoke about how the processes of production and consumption of knowledge have been insensitive to the special needs of the disabled as well as the valuable perspectives they have to offer. Schools, colleges, universities, libraries and museums have very limited facilities for the disabled and most of them are not equipped to provide access to the physically challenged. Although the mainstream feminist movement is slowly taking cognizance of the problems and needs of disabled women, women's conferences still do not realize the need to produce Braille or "talking" versions of brochures, programmes or proceedings. The women's movement also needs to realize that while women with disability do foreground issues related to disability, they also need to have access to and make contributions to other fields of women's activities. So maximum efforts should be directed at preventing their marginalization within the women's movement. Aryak Guha, a Ph.D scholar, in his reading of "Gandhari" in *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books, attempted to examine the processes of constructing potent and influential discourses of femininity in the popular medium. Guha demonstrated how the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books construct an ideal of Hindu womanhood through Gandhari, the self-sacrificing wife who renounces the realm of sight willingly out of duty towards her blind husband. He pointed out that the Mahabharata story has been transformed into a bourgeois narrative to produce this version of an ideal of self-blinded womanhood. Guha's talk on the deliberately disabled Gandhari provided an interesting counterpoint to Shampa Sengupta's talk on women with disabilities trying to rise above them.

Activism, Experience and Knowledge

There were two sessions on the linkages between activist experiences and the knowledge production underlying strategies for change. One was chaired by Sourin Bhattacharya, a retired professor of Economics, with Rangan Chakravarty, media analyst and independent researcher, as discussant.

Anchita Ghatak of Action Aid, also an activist and founder member of *Parichiti*, an organization for domestic workers, presented a critical analysis of the discourse on trafficking in women in the contemporary context of globalization. Ajitha Susan George, an activist from BIRSA (Bindrai Institute for Research, Study and Action) in Jharkhand, spoke about the struggles of women in uranium mining in Jharkhand. A critical problem she highlighted was that while scientific data on the impact of radioactivity on people's health was necessary to convince scientists, the medical community and the government of the urgent need for action that would save lives, yet, the technical expertise for collecting, processing and presenting such data in a particular format was inaccessible to the villagers. While the final data-based report of the survey that BIRSA did initiate in the region, in January 2006, on the impact of radioactivity on reproductive health of women, is still incomplete for lack of expertise in processing such data, yet the data and awareness created in the process of the study created an atmosphere of protest and anger, strengthening the movement in the area. The ultimate irrelevance of such knowledge however was driven home by the fact that despite being confronted by the local adivasis with concrete data, the UCIL (Uranium Corporation of India Limited) continued to remain in denial, emphasizing that radioactivity had no harmful effects on health. The question Ajitha concluded with, in grim irony, was, who was holding on to blind faith – the unlettered adivasis, or the UCIL and the Atomic Energy Commission of India?

Krishna Bandyopadhyay, activist and an editor of the Bangla feminist little magazine *Khoj Ekhon*, discussing women's perspectives on the appropriation of agricultural land for industry and SEZ's, asserted that the contemporary people's movement against this appropriation was different from earlier movements, that had aimed at appropriation of political power, in that now the focus is solely on safeguarding their land – and the emphasis is on identity related to land, hence the refusal to let go of it. This 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 other session, chaired by Samita Sen, Director of SWS, Jadavpur University, with Kumkum Sangari as discussant, was devoted to the personal narrative of Devyani Kumari, a Dalit feminist lawyer from Jehanabad, Bihar. The response to her account, of struggles and strategies adopted both as a young Dalit woman and then as a lawyer in an upper-caste patriarchal set-up, 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.

Kavita Panjabi (IAWS Eastern Region Co-ordinator), with inputs from Paromita Chakravarti.
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IAWS Northern Regional Workshop ***Women's Studies and Knowledge Production***

Organised by the IAWS, CWDS, New Delhi and Centre for Women's Studies, University of Jammu
20th & 21st April, 2007

The northern regional workshop of the Indian Association of Women's Studies was held at the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Jammu April 20-21st 2007. The workshop was financially supported from different sources — the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Jammu, the IAWS, the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi and by the participants as well. The workshop had more than one aim – to make stronger connections between women's studies and the region of Jammu and Kashmir, as well as to think about issues of knowledge production at all levels of the educational system. Prof. Poonam Dhawan, Director of the Centre for Women's Studies at Jammu hosted the workshop, with inputs from Zarina Bhatti and Mary John from the IAWS.

After words of welcome and an introduction to the workshop by the organisers, the first session was devoted to discussions of local issues in Jammu and Kashmir from a gender perspective. The speakers included Anuradha Bhasin, editor of the *Kashmir Times*, Kavita Suri, a senior journalist and member of WISCOMP, Dr. Yasmeen Khan, Director of Women's Studies at Women's College, Srinagar, and Dr. Rehana Kesar from the J&K Health Services. The presentations and discussions revolved around the deep victimisation of men, women and children in the Valley due to the conflict. Displacement, high unemployment, sexual abuse and forced marriages, are indications of the extent of social breakdown, amidst the fight for survival and minimum security. The fact that 12% of the army is from the Jammu region has made for further divisions. The Association of Parents of Displaced Persons largely led by mothers and so-called half-widows of disappeared men, has made the strong demand that they want the truth from the state and not compensation. The region is changing in unprecedented ways – forms of extreme poverty including destitution not seen before, a shortage of men leading to changes in marriage patterns and fears of late or no marriage among women, the growth of dowry associated with “mainstream culture” elsewhere, among other developments. The discussions touched on all these extremely difficult issues in the context of the existence of 9 women's studies centres in J & K, as well as the need for the State Commission of Women in Jammu to get a much-needed Chairperson so as to be active.

The next session on Education and Gender looked at various aspects related to education that require more attention from women's studies. The first two presentations by Sadhna Saxena (Central Institute of Education, Delhi) and Shirley Joseph (Jesus and Mary College) discussed the new four year course Bachelor of Elementary Education in the context of going

beyond the hitherto dominant focus on questions of the accessibility of girls to education. The very training of teachers is an extremely significant site – both of conformism and of contestation. On the one hand there are forces that emphasize conformism from the institution, especially given the increasing feminisation of elementary education, and parental pressure on the trainees to choose this course in the first place. A special paper on gender is optional at the CIE but has little institutional support, while it is compulsory at Jesus and Mary College and one of the more popular papers, indicative of how gender can make a difference. The next presentation by Purva Bharadwaj focussed on the construction of nation and gender in language textbooks, part of a larger study conducted by Nirantar. Drawing on different textbooks – both by state and private publishers in Hindi, Urdu and Sanskrit — many interesting configurations of nationalism and gender emerged, and in contrasting ways. In the case of Sanskrit in particular, both the nationalisation of Sanskrit and the Sanskritisation of the nation have been simultaneous processes. Farida Khan, from Jamia Millia Islamia, talked about her relationship and work on education in the context of Kashmir. She was particularly interested in the historical difference between Kashmir and other parts of the sub-continent in that education for girls and women emerged much later in time. But she also emphasized the critical role that institutions of education have played in the current crisis especially. Keeping schools open and classes running has been one way of countering the fear and uncertainty of everyday life. The last presentation in this session was by Subbalakshmi Nandi on Literacy and Power in the context of SHGs. Her discussion exposed the claims of poverty alleviation and women's empowerment being made in the promotion of SHGs. In their study, literacy among SHG members was only 39% and clearly not a priority. With no links to local panchayats, and very few SHGs raising women related issues, even the poverty alleviation claims are quite unclear, since the money raised by SHG women is largely used for immediate needs and crises in the family. Considerable discussion on various aspects relating to education and literacy movements, teacher-student dynamics, education in the Jammu and Kashmir region, and so on ensued.

The second day began with two presentations mapping women's studies. In her presentation on women's studies and South Asia, Uma Chakravarti discussed the difficulties in accessing South Asia, given the way in which either our respective national contexts, western theories or local specificities get foregrounded. In the context of being part of creating a women's studies course on South Asia (in Lahore),

she described some of the strategies she employed for teaching history — drawing on multiple patriarchies, historical scholarship from the larger region of Asia where detailed studies have been undertaken, work on nationalism and women's movements, majority/minority differences and so on. Reicha Tanwar from Kurukshetra University gave an account of the range of work being done by women's studies centres in the northern region – researches, outreach and teaching — against the background of the claims of women's studies to be both a perspective and a discipline. In particular, she focussed on the kind of marginalisation experienced by women's studies in spite of the enormous demands they experience. The need for an orientation for many of the new women's studies centres was also discussed.

The next session was a roundtable on women's studies in their diverse institutional locations. Sadhna Arya made a presentation on the National Commission of Women in terms of its chequered relationship with the women's movement, focussing on the kinds of researches that the NCW has made possible. She emphasized that many valuable studies have been conducted, especially when women's groups have drawn on NCW support to conduct particular researches, which needs to be more widely disseminated. Manvinder Kaur from the Centre for Women's Studies in Punjab University described the challenges they have faced, especially in conducting an MA in Women's Studies. Forced to rely on faculty from other departments has sometimes been at the cost of the course, when a perspective and understanding is lacking. Issues of plagiarism and women's studies as a soft option not requiring any expertise also came up. Suranjita Ray from Daulat Ram College described a special certificate course in Women's

Studies that has been offered by some of Delhi's undergraduate women's colleges for interested students. On the one hand, the course has already been designed, leaving little flexibility within the college context. On the other hand, depending on the commitment of the course coordinator, students do undergo a process of change, and especially relate to the more innovative aspects of the course. However, questions of epistemological approaches to women's studies and the need for creative methodologies require much more attention. The next speaker, Abha Chauhan from Jammu University discussed the interface between the discipline of sociology and work on gender. Work on gender of relevance to sociology has been done as much from within as outside the discipline. Areas of relative neglect, however, are still apparent – on issues of violence for instance, as well as regarding different communities and castes, such as the OBCs for instance. The final speaker in this session was Neloufer Khan from the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Kashmir. Her centre was sanctioned as recently as 2006 (one of 3 centres in Srinagar). While these new centres can expect special funding from the Government at the Centre, they remain isolated from the rest of country and from the developments in women's studies. The tendency is for such new centres to get into a proliferation of programmes, trainings and so on. Discussion following the roundtable drew links between the different sessions and topics, especially in the light of possible activities in the Jammu Kashmir region, as well as for women's studies elsewhere.

Mary John (IAWS, Secretary and Northern Region Co-ordinator) with inputs from Zarina Bhatta and Poonam Dhawan.
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IAWS North-Eastern Regional Workshop
Feminist Scholarship in North-Eastern India :
Retrieving and Reconstructing Women

To be organized by the IAWS and
Departments of History and Political Science, NEHU, Shillong
15th & 16th October, 2007

The IAWS North-Eastern Regional Seminar, with the working title "Feminist Scholarship in North-Eastern India: Retrieving and Reconstructing the Women", is being organised at the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, in collaboration with the Departments of History and of Political Science, NEHU. The workshop, which will be on 15 and 16 October 2007, seeks to draw in participants from as many of the North-Eastern states as possible: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.

Women's Histories, Women's Narratives

Organised by the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata
29th & 30th March, 2007

Since 1990, the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, has been involved in a project of recovering women's rare – often forgotten writings. Now with more than 30 titles in the *Women Writers Reprint Series* it is time to think how women's narratives can be read within a larger historical discourse which would enrich the discipline of Women's Studies. With this in view the School organized a national workshop on March 29-30, 2007. Scholars from New Delhi, Hyderabad, Trivandrum, Kolkata and Medinipur participated in the well attended two-day workshop. It was dedicated to the centenarian Lila Majumder (b.1908), the acclaimed Bangla writer who wrote mainly for children. This was probably the last tribute paid to her before she passed away on April 5, 2007. On this occasion the School brought out and distributed a brochure with her short biography and a select bibliography.

The workshop was inaugurated by Professor Anuradha Chanda, ex-director of the School. Historian Tanika Sarkar, in her keynote address, talked about Rashsundari Debi, author of the first women's autobiography in Bangla, *Amar Jiban* which documents how a docile and obscure housewife in an orthodox Hindu family engaged herself in the "offensive" acts of reading and writing. Sarkar's own work on the autobiography, *Words to Win: the making of Amar Jiban, A modern Autobiography*, is well known. In this presentation, Sarkar explored how such writings could be situated within a larger framework of historical discourse especially since "the world of the institutionalized discipline of Indian history still refuses to accept 'histories of representations' and 'history from below'".

The first session, chaired by Dr. Rusati Sen, had three papers on Lila Majumder which examined how her complex narratives are intrinsically grounded in the world around her. Talking about Majumder's autobiography *Pakdondi*, Barnita Bagchi pointed out how skillfully Majumder used simple narratives for complex explorations of traditional notions of gender roles. In an inter-textual paper presentation Aveek Sen demonstrated how Majumder's narrative process is hinged on the metaphors of home and abandonment and how the themes of loss and recovery are reiterated in her writings. Jayeeta Bagchi's paper was on the unresolved dichotomy of Hinduism and Brahmoism that existed in Majumdar's life and is reflected in the fantastic worlds she creates and the fascinating women she writes about.

Himani Bannerji, York University, Canada chaired the last session of the day in which G. Arunima and J. Devika, presented

papers on Malayalee women writers of the twentieth century. While Arunima looked at two literary texts, Devika took up non-literary works by subversive female authors. Ritu Sen Chaudhuri, in the same session, spoke on Sarala Devi's autobiography *Jibaner Jharapata*. Active nationalist and a free-thinking woman, Sarala Devi's public voice had a distinctly "male" tone. The paper argued that empowerment does not necessarily guarantee a separate voice.

On the second day, of the seminar, ex-director of the School, Shefali Moitra chaired the first session on Women and Partition Narratives. Much work has been done recently on the partition yet both the paper presenters noted women's significant absences from these histories, with only a few exceptions. Dr.

Sudeshna Banerjee, History Department, J.U, currently involved in an archiving project on the partition of India argued for a new methodology to deal with the issue of listening to women's voices. Rukmini Sen's paper sought to map the very varied responses that women from different locations had towards the Partition.

Prof. Samita Sen chaired the second session of the day. Anindita Mukhopadhyay opened the session with her observations on how the construction of the

colonial *bhadralok* and *bhadramahila* depended on the assumption of "non-criminality", the impossibility of these classes of being involved in crime. Charu Gupta's paper on Yashoda Devi, an ayurvedic practitioner from Allahabad, opened up new notions of women's agency within a conventional, even conservative milieu.

The last session, chaired by Jasodhara Bagchi, founding director of the School, had three paper presenters – Ratnabali Chatterjee, Lakshmi Subramanian and Aparna Bandyopadhyay. While the first two papers were on narratives of performing artists from Bengal and Chennai, the third paper was on the novels of Nirupama Devi.

The Workshop raised questions of how a different history or a different approach to history is/ can be possible through the study and/ or is essential for the study of woman's writings/ narratives.

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Anti-Trafficking Workshop

Organised by the West Bengal Commission for Women
1st & 2nd February, 2007

On 1st and 2nd February, 2007 the West Bengal Commission for Women, with support from the National Commission for Women, organized the Eastern Regional Workshop to consider the Draft Integrated Plan of Action to Prevent and Combat Human Trafficking with Special Focus on Women and Children. This workshop should be seen as the Eastern Regional Consultation that is meant to complement the four other Regional Workshops on the subject conducted by the National Commission for Women in the North, South, West and North-Eastern regions.

This new Draft Plan is going to replace the earlier 1998 Draft Plan to Combat Trafficking specially in the light of the U.N. Protocol of 2000 on the subject.

Justice Samaresh Banerjee, Lokayukta, West Bengal, inaugurated the workshop held at Jadavpur University, Kolkata; and Professor Malini Bhattacharya delivered the keynote address. There was a strong presence of the judiciary from West Bengal as well as from Bihar and Orissa, namely Dr. Ravi Ranjan, Advocate, Patna High Court, Justice Navin Sinha, Patna High Court, Sri S. K. Mishra, Spl. Judge, CBI, Orissa. Representation from Bihar, Orissa and Jharkhand included, respectively, Smt. Renuka Palit, Jan Shikshan Sansthan, from Gaya; Smt. Naseema, PARCHAM, Smt. Namrata Chadha and Smt. Tapasi Praharaj, President AIDWA, Orissa; and Smt. Ritu Panday, FACE, Jharkhand. Those participating from West Bengal included Atma Marzada, SLARTC, UNICEF, NAWO, Women's Interlink Foundation, Sanlaap, SEVA, Jayprakash Institute of Social Change, Jabala Action Research Organization, Apne Aap and Durbar Mahila Sammonnyaya Samity. Police personnel present were the I.G. (O) West Bengal, DSP, CID, West Bengal, S. P. Dakshin Dinajpur, and S. P. Malda. In addition to members from the School of Women's Studies Jadavpur University and Women's Studies Research Centre, Calcutta University, there was an encouraging presence of other women activists and academics.

After the opening Plenary Session, the programme was conducted in two simultaneous parallel groups, the first on Law and Law Enforcement Agencies and the second on Rescue, Rehabilitation and Reintegration. Recommendations from both the groups were presented to the house in the final plenary session.

A core committee was approved by the house, with Justice Samaresh Banerjee as Chairperson, to finalize the recommendations. The West Bengal State Commission for Women organized a number of meetings of this core committee.

Prof. Malini Bhattacharya, member, NCW, Sri Taj Mohammad, Dy. Director, Prosecution, Sri Banibrata Basu, I.P.S., I.G. (Administration), and Smt. Bharati Mutsuddi (Mukherjee) and Smt. Sarbani Bhattacharya, members of the West Bengal Commission for Women, assisted in the drawing up of the recommendations which are as follows:

1. PREVENTION

- A. Prevention of increased incidents of trafficking
- B. Preventive measures for emerging areas of concern
- C. Infrastructural Recommendations
- D. Prevention of Cross-Border Trafficking
- E. Social Measures for Prevention

2. PROSECUTION

Need for a new Law

A. Legal Definition of Trafficking etc.

- i) Trafficking:
- ii) Trafficker:

B. Surveillance of Traffickers and Penalties

3. PROTECTION OF VICTIMS

1. Guidelines for police personnel.
2. Early recording of statements of witnesses U/S 164 CrPC.
3. Section 5 (c) of the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act be reviewed.
4. Section 7 of the ITP A be suitably amended.
5. Supreme Court Guidelines in the Delhi Domestic Working Women's Forum v Union of India case shall be implemented.
6. The Special Courts, as already provided for in the ITP A, be set up as soon as possible.
7. All cases should be disposed of within a period of 6 months.
8. Mandatory protection to be offered to victims and witnesses.
9. *SARIO Regional Victim! Witness Protection Protocol to Combat Trafficking, Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse of Women and Children in South Asia*, and the *Minimum Standards of Care and Support for the Victims of Trafficking and Other Forms of Violence in South Asia* be integrated into the new legislation.

4. REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION

Inauguration of IAWS Archives



The IAWS Archives were formally given a place in the Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT Women's University at a simple function on March 14, 2007. The presence of several founding and senior IAWS members added depth and meaning to the moment: Neera Desai, Veena Mazumdar, Amita Verma, Maithreyi Krishna Raj, Rohini Gawankar, Usha Thakkar, Chhaya Datar and many others. The occasion was the release of Prof. Neera Desai's new book "Feminism as Experience: Thoughts and Narratives" by SPARROW.

The Director of RCWS, Dr. Veena Poonacha had got a display case made and fixed at the entrance to the Centre. Several IAWS publications were displayed in it. A larger space inside the library has been earmarked and is being prepared to house the entire body of materials. The area in front of the display case was marked out by colourful rangolis and several broad bowls of water with floating flowers had been arranged around them. Neeraben, Veenadi and others lit candles and floated them in the water. Kamala Ganesh, IAWS joint secretary said that it was appropriate that the IAWS Archives should be housed at RCWS with whom it has a historical association. She mentioned that the work of weeding out and preparing an inventory of the materials was proceeding apace, and that very soon, the materials would be available for consultation. Archiving and Digitising would take some more time and professional inputs.

Concern About Student Membership

It is a matter of deep concern that in our Silver Jubilee year, our student membership continues to be just 4% to 5% of the total IAWS membership. IAWS has always recognised the importance of continuously reaching out to and involving younger women as active participants in the Association. The category of student membership, with a reduced subscription and valid for three years, is intended for this age group. In 2002, the then EC had suggested an amendment to introduce an age limit of 18-25 years for students (Ref. IAWS/LL.CONST/181/2002, dated 12.02.2002). Together with certain other amendments related to the membership fee, this was ratified by the General Body. The student membership since 1999 shows a mixed trend, rising in the years in which the National

Conferences are held and falling off after the Conferences.

We have recently had a number of cases of young Women's Studies researchers who already have a Masters in other subjects or have worked as practitioners/activists. Such students are over 25 years and so are not eligible in our student category. The present EC feels that we need to make a special effort to improve membership in this category. One suggestion is to remove the age limit that was introduced in 2002. We would also like to have other suggestions for the EC to discuss at our next meeting. Please do take a few moments to respond to iawsgsec@gmail.com (Mary John) or iawspresident@gmail.com (Sumi Krishna).

Leela Majumdar : The Keenest Things of Life

Leela Majumdar, who died last month almost in her 100th year, once wrote that those who have forgotten their own childhood could never write for children. This was in her introduction to the works of her uncle (and Satyajit Ray's grandfather), Upendrakishore Roy Chowdhury, the pioneering children's writer, illustrator, printer and publisher. Majumdar belonged to that brilliantly innovative tradition of children's writing — enlightened, eccentric and hilarious — founded by Upendrakishore, perfected by his son, Sukumar Roy, and then bequeathed to her and Satyajit, who made it part of their own genius.

Born in Calcutta on February 26, 1908, to Promodaranjan Ray and Surama Debi, Majumdar spent her childhood in Shillong. These early years are unforgettably recounted in her memoirs, *Aar Konokhane* (1967) and *Pakdondi* (1986). In 1920, the family moved to Calcutta, where she went to Diocesan School and College. She received a First Class First in English Literature in her BA as well as MA from Calcutta University. Feeling the need to carve out a life of her own at some distance from an overwhelmingly loving family, she taught for a while at Maharani Girls' School in Darjeeling, for a year at Santiniketan (invited by Rabindranath Tagore), and then briefly at Ashutosh College, after which she devoted all her time to writing. She worked as a producer for All India Radio from 1956 to 1963, during which she serialized *Thakumar Chithi* for *Mahila Mahal*. She published all of this later as *Monimala*, a fictionalised conduct-book for middle-class Bengali girls. This is perhaps the fullest expression of her personal conformism — impeccable and generally respectful of the institutions of marriage and family, but full of astute and humorous flights of critical individuality and independence. Her marriage to Sudhir Kumar Majumdar in 1932 created a permanent rift with her father, whose orthodox Brahmoism could not accept his daughter choosing to marry a Hindu man.

Majumdar's career in fiction started with a self-illustrated story for Upendrakishore and Sukumar's children's magazine, *Sandesh*. Together with Satyajit and her niece, Nalini Das, she edited *Sandesh* throughout her writing life. She also wrote for children in *Mouchak*, *Ramdhanu* and *Rangmashal*. She

eventually won the Ananda and Rabindra Puroshkars, but in the absence of a proper set of collected works, and owing to her aversion to being taken too seriously, it is easy to forget Majumdar's versatility. Apart from her children's fiction, and her deathless cookbook, she wrote novels for adults, and a biography of Rabindranath. She also translated works of Jonathan Swift, Ernest Hemingway, Edgar Wallace and Hans Christian Andersen into Bengali. She occasionally published her literary criticism in English, her first article being on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

Her own fiction is peopled with an extraordinary variety of children, adults, flora and fauna, rivers, forests and mountains. The people and

creatures in her stories lead lives and evoke atmospheres that are often endearingly familiar to her readers. But they also conjure up fascinatingly different, or wistfully strange, ways of being, pulling in all sorts of odd directions beyond the pale of Bengali, middle-class domesticity. The bereft, the displaced and the underdog — be they frightened children, untameable cats or hungry ghosts — always found a place in her unsentimental acts of empathy, committed as much to giving pleasure as to telling the whole, and often heartbreaking, truth about human lives. Apart from the primary influence of Sukumar and Upendrakishore, and of her cousins, Sukhalata Rao and Punyalata Chakraborty, she placed herself within a narrative tradition going back to Abanindranath on the one hand, and on the other, to the Khasia maids who enlivened her childhood in the hills with their grotesque stories ("*bikawt goppo*"). She was steeped in Rabindranath, but found his



Leela Majumdar (1908-2007)

children's writings somewhat "stiff" and remained subtly critical of the Tagorean establishment. Finely aware of the conflict between traditional perceptions of women's role in the home and her own compulsion to write, she consistently distanced herself from feminist ideology and activism: "I like independence, so what's the need for Lib? Being civilized is enough for me, what will I do with modernity? ... Those who call the care of their own homes the work of slaves, in what way are they modern? Such slavery is a thing of the past. Caring for the home is for all time." [Pakdondi, p. 428.]

To read, and to keep returning to, the best of Leela Majumdar's writings is to discover, and then rediscover many times over, all that must be kept alive to keep us from turning into crabbed old bores, out of touch with the keenest things of life: laughter and loss, sense and nonsense, the weird and the delightful, running away from home and returning to its well-lit warmth.

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Mandakini Narayan : A Guiding Spirit

Mandakini Narayan, popularly known as "MA" in the new women's movement of India, passed away on 16th December, 2006. I got to know her due to her daughter, a fellow feminist from Calicut (Kozikode), whom I met in 1978 immediately after her release from Kerala prison after 7 1/2 years of solitary confinement.

Mandakini Narayan was born in 1925 in Bhavnagar, Gujarat. She grew up in Grant Road, Mumbai seeing and listening political speeches of Gandhiji and other leaders at August Kranti Maidan. As a student of New Era School, she joined "Monkey Army" created by Usha Mehta. In 1942, she matriculated and joined Elphinston College at Churchgate, Mumbai. She was full of energy. In her own words, "That was the most exiting time of the nationalist movement. The Quit India Resolution was passed and we also went to attend the conference. There we met many nationalist leaders, Gandhiji, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbai Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Shubhash Chandra Bose, Bhulabhai Desai and Sarojini Naidu."

Later on, she became active in Friends of Soviet Union (FSU). She met her future husband, Com. Kunnikal Narayan in the meeting of FSU. She married him and moved to Calicut in Kerala with him. As her husband was busy with revolutionary activities, she worked as a head-mistress of Gujarati school. She gave up her job in 1968 to join her husband in an armed uprising at Wynad against super-exploitation of landlords. Her daughter, Ajitha, 16 year old at that time was a student of Providence College, Kozikode. She was also active in the revolutionary movement in the turbulent 1970s. All three were arrested, imprisoned and kept in solitary confinement.

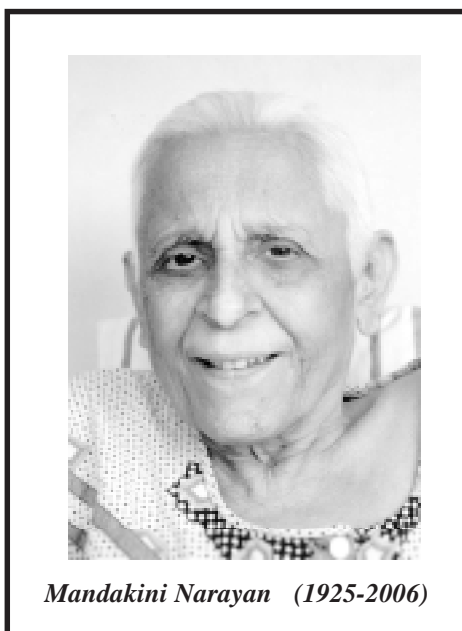
When they were released, they had lost old contacts. After Kunnikal Narayan passed away, Aji and Ma started working for women's movement. My trips to Kerala increased. I stayed with them. I still remember spending nights after nights discussing feminism, "women's question", "patriarchy" and giving talks during the days in schools and colleges of Kozikode. In one such night, we came up with a plan to organize 4th National Conference of women's Liberation movement in India in Kozikode in 1990.

We worked closely during 1980s. Ma was unassuming. In spite of severe bouts of asthma, she inspired us to work for empowerment of girls and women. All women in their neighbourhood sought her advice. Poor folks just hero-worshipped them. I was touched by Ma's humility and care and concern for me. The conference was a grand success. She acted as a link between younger and older generation of feminists. She was our friend, philosopher and guide. She

built people without pushing them too hard.

I got to know many beautiful aspects of her persona when she came to stay with us in Mumbai during mid 1990s. She was a refined human being with interest in music, painting, folk dance and reading. She was intellectually alert, politically very articulate and up-to-date in reading of feminist literature. She was a guiding spirit of feminist groups such as Bodhana, Navodaya Mahila Samajam, Kerala Stree Vedike and Anveshi. Ma, your undying enthusiasm for progress of women's movement is with us.

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Mandakini Narayan (1925-2006)

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One of the main objectives of setting up Centres for Women's Studies as per the Xth Plan UGC Guidelines is to mainstream gender concerns into the curriculum. This can be done at various levels such as the Foundation Course at the UG level, as special subjects of study at the UG and PG level and also, by instituting Women's Studies/ Gender Studies as a separate discipline, with Certificate and Diploma Courses as also MA, MPhil and Ph.D. programmes.

In the new credit-based semester scheme introduced during 2006-07 by the Mangalore University, "Gender Equity" has been introduced as a compulsory subject of study carrying about 25% weightage in the semester syllabus in the Foundation Course for students of all streams that is BA, BSc, BCom and other general courses at the undergraduate level. This is a compulsory course for all undergraduate students in the University and the first such in Southern India. Apart from Delhi and Bombay Universities, this may well be one of the first successful attempts in South India to introduce Gender in the foundation course, albeit a small way. While the full semester of 100 marks (64 hours) carries a section on Human Rights for 20 marks and another on Environment for 40 marks, 20 marks is for Gender Equity and the rest for internal assessment in the same proportion/s.

The initiative appears to have received a good response as could be gauged from the feedback of Teacher's Training Workshops held for the same. Two text books – one each in English and Kannada – have been prepared to provide relevant material to the students readily. The book contains a discussion of all the four sections of the syllabus prescribed and has been appreciated by the experts in the field of Women's Studies, who scrutinized the book at a workshop, before it was finalized for publication.

At the UG/PG level in Humanities/ Social Sciences, initiative has already been taken to the Mangalore University to introduce gender concerns into the syllabus through a compulsory paper on "Feminism/s and Women's Writing" in MA (English) and "Sociology of Gender" in MA (Sociology). As gender is an urgent development concern, particularly from the perspective of rights, whether women's/human rights, other departments too have been conducting considerable research in this emergent area. It has also been suggested that a cafeteria approach in a credit-based semester scheme with a teaching of papers on gender across discipline too may be useful.

UNIT B: GENDEREQUITY

16 hours/20 marks

Key Concepts:

2 hours

Sex and Gender-Masculinity & Femininity –Patriarchy, Matriarchy, Gender Roles & Attributes, Gender Division of Labour-Gender bias- Gender stereotypes-Need for Gender sensitization.

Women's Status in India

2 hours

Important indicators - Sex Ratio, Education, Health, Nutrition, Maternal and Infant Mortality, Work Participation rates, Political Participation.

Contemporary Women's Issues

6 hours

- i) Discrimination against Girl Child
- ii) Violence against Women
- iii) Problems of Health & Nutrition
- iv) Women's education & Gender bias in education
- v) Trafficking in Women
- vi) Globalization and its Impact on Women.

State Initiatives for Gender Equity

6 hours

Constitutional Rights of Women-Laws pertaining to women-The National & State Commissions for Women.

Congratulations!



Ruth Manorama, veteran activist and President, National Federation of Dalit Women, has won the Right Livelihood Award for 2006. The award, often called the Alternative Nobel, is in recognition of her work for the empowerment of Dalit women.

Female Sporting Bodies and Feminist Sports

The female body has always been fundamental to women's studies in India, but hardly any attention has been given to female sporting bodies. The women's movement in India has been trying to raise consciousness about the exploitation and control of women's bodies and has also been talking about the power of the woman's body, but there has been a strange silence about female sporting bodies, even though they have striven to erase the gendered label of frailty associated with women's bodies. Women's studies scholars have meticulously addressed issues related to sexual harassment and abuse, domestic violence and rape, gendered representation of the woman's body in commercial advertisements and reproductive-health issues related to the women's body. A major feminist goal is to achieve women's complete control over their bodies and freedom from any male/ state intervention. In spite of this, our women's studies scholars and activists have ignored the potential of the female sporting bodies, and have also failed to notice the relevance of physicality or empowerment through physicality in feminist politics.

There are two broad ways of looking at the problem. One is to study sport as an institution that reinforces and perpetuates gender discrimination. When we look at sport as a patriarchal model of exploitation, we would come across issues of abuse, of sexual harassment, of misrepresentation of the female bodies in the media, of other kinds of discrimination including the practice of gender verification in sport. Scholars and activists of women's studies should strive to ensure that sports are equally accessible to girls and boys, to women and men. They need to fight for easier access and better amenities for women in sports, better support and rewards, equal rights with men under the law, equal coaching and training facilities, and an equal voice with men in decision-making bodies. While interviewing female athletes in India, in the course of my research, I have discovered a general inability to express experiences of discrimination on part of the athletes interviewed. This inability could result from any or any combination of, a number of possibilities: one, they could not trust the interviewer completely, two, they were unable to articulate these experiences, three, they were not aware of what could be called discriminatory and what not. The last possibility calls for a need for education, which adequately empowers these female athletes to identify gender discrimination and become aware of their rights. The need for our women's studies scholars and activists to intervene here cannot be overemphasized.

On the other hand, sport can also be seen as an educational activity that helps in building confidence, and as many researches in the West tend to prove, it helps in reducing risky behavior among girls. While critics object to the competitive and commercial element in organized sports as immoral, it cannot be doubted that sports and especially team sports, has an incredible power of inspiring human bonding which is a potentially empowering experience for those women who hardly have much access to female bonding. For women's studies scholars who have been increasingly emphasizing collective action, sport could be used as an instrument through which such collectivity could be initiated and nurtured. Even though feminist theory looks at sport as an essential instrument of patriarchy that reproduces dominant ideas about gender in society, it has to be acknowledged that women's sport could be used in transforming this gender order and upholding alternative ideas about maleness and femaleness. Transforming sports to emphasize partnership over competition and domination could be an effective alternative.

There are a plethora of issues that surround women's sports in India. In the US, the passage of Title IX was one of a number of events that led to increase women's participation in sports. In 1972, Congress passed Title IX as one of the amendments to the Higher Education Act. Its basic idea was simple: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, or denied the benefits of, or subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal aid." It did not explicitly say anything about athletic programs, but the sport feminists of the time utilized this potential of the law and took initiative in using this law to reduce gender discrimination in sport. Title IX, today, is known mainly because of its contribution to women's athletics in the US.

We do not have Title IX, but we may have a law that can have a similar impact in India. We may not have a Billie Jean King to play Battle of Sexes, but we may soon have one. To transform these possibilities into reality, we need our scholars and activists to play an active role in this area.

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PUBLICATIONS

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 - ii. *National Council of Educational Research and Training* - Vina Mazumdar and Balaji Pandey, CWDS, 1988.
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2. *Women and Law: An Annotated Bibliography (No.VI)*: Anju Vyas and Sunita Asija, July, 1988.

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Stree (Kolkata) 2006, 450pp ISBN 8185604703,

Portraying Quiet Realms

Mythily Sivaraman , *Fragments of a Life: A Family Archive*

Zubaan, An imprint of Kali for Women: New Delhi 2006 Rs. 395

At a time when there is much talk among feminists and historians about ‘herstories’, retrieving women’s voices , and the use of non-conventional sources to reconstruct subaltern histories, Mythily Sivaraman’s labour of love is a shining example of how this can actually be done. Taking time off from her political activism, she opens the blue tin trunk, metaphoric as well as literal, that lie in so many of our attics. Her grandmother Subbalakshmi’s tin trunk contained a diary kept for two years in the 1920s , news clippings, a book or two, receipts and requisition slips of books bought and borrowed, library listings, family letters, correspondence with Connemara and Madras University library, receipts of donations made to the Congress and Moplah fund, and notebooks in which she had copied down passages from books – well beloved passages that had delighted, inspired or moved her. These fragments hinted at a rich inner life, full of ideas and aspirations, but Mythily’s own image of her as an unusual personality, could be dredged up only in slivers and shards, for Subbalakshmi’s life in a tradition-bound patriarchal set up was largely shrouded in silence. Mythily proceeds to fill in the hazy outline through her own mother Pankajam’s memoirs of her mother Subbalakshmi, and through talking to kin and friends who had known Subbalakshmi. She also contextualises the long life of Subbalakshmi, born at the end of the 19th century , in the Tamil Brahmin milieu and the national movement and its concerns, evoking an entire era and ethos. The book is an exploration in feminist historical methodology, without self consciously intending to be so, and though Mythily is apologetic about not being a scholar, she combines devotion and emotion with meticulous and thorough research to produce a work that makes compelling reading.

Feminist thinking has in recent decades nuanced the characterisation of women’s lives in the past – from the extreme colours of either bowed-head submission or glorious resistance to patriarchal structures, to a more shaded, negotiated reality in which structure and agency intertwine. Many of us have gone on to discover in our traditional grandmothers, spirited women with hidden aspirations, spunky and strategic actions, cunning gives and takes, practical compromises. Mothers are sometimes too close, the Freudian battles too immediate, for a rediscovery but skipping a generation often catalyzes a re-look at taken-for-granted foremothers .

Subbalakshmi’s outer life was as per the convention of her place and time – married at 11, a mother at 14, several children, some deceased early, a husband who despite his bardic inclinations, was insensitive to her needs and aspirations. She was also plagued with ill health, possibly accentuated by her unhappy married life. Although her husband was in a secure government job, her abject lack of financial and personal independence are evident. Her thirst and longing for knowledge, and for formal education were thwarted in the decisive manner in which personhood was denied to women in

the typical Tamil Brahmin domestic culture of that time. Both Githa Hariharan’s foreword and Uma Chakravarti’s afterword confirm this with examples from their own families. Subbalakshmi’s unsuccessful struggles, her despondency and despair, her determined self-education, her militancy and resolve in educating her daughter and the hardships she willingly underwent for it are painstakingly brought out in the book. Subbalakshmi’s own diary was not always forthcoming; it was as remarkable for the things it did not say as for those things that it did record, indicating the extent to which Subbalakshmi had internalised the condition of not speaking out freely. Mythily has had to read between the lines. The silences and the scraps of material together evoke the harrowing and chilling domestic atmosphere that scarred Subbalakshmi’s psyche and extracted a price in the form of mental illness in her later years . Yet she continued to indulge in her passion for reading. Her quiet engagement with nationalism, with the aesthetic ideals of Tagore, her intense love for nature, her distancing from the flamboyant religiosity of her husband even while sharing the household with him, reveal her efforts to be true to her own self.

Mythily’s sensitive portrait brings home to us yet again how real and serious were the domestic obstacles facing Brahmin women in the 19th and early 20th century. In hindsight, the efforts of the social reformers have been castigated for mistaking specific problems of upper caste women for problems of Indian women as a whole. Yet, the gap between the entitlements of the two sexes was perhaps widest, and the actual restrictions on personal autonomy and mobility of women sharpest in that period in Brahmin households . I have in my earlier work tried to grapple with the idea of women of upper castes in the traditional social structure being simultaneously implicated in the privileges of their caste as well as oppressions stemming from being female in those particular castes. It is evident in Subbalakshmi’s life that the privilege of her caste did little to mitigate her suffering . Yet in two generations, her grand daughter Mythily and others of that cohort like Uma and Githa have, to a great extent, broken the barriers to knowledge and education. It is worth remembering that the advantage of upper caste women today over other women in educational attainments is recent. It is as much a product of changes in social structure, of feminist activism and gender sensitive policies as it is of a harvesting of the symbolic (educational) capital of the caste. Such symbolic capital, though existing previously, could not be harnessed by women in an earlier time. The transformation from Subbalakshmi to Mythily gives hope that un-gendered access to knowledge is achievable for all. Whether such access by itself will bring about gender justice is a different question.

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