

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

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Feminist Perspectives and Gender Studies in India I

Welcome back to the class. We are now in the ninth week and in this week we explore the questions of gender studies and the influence of feminism which had a significant impact on Indian Sociology. So, as the questions related to gender, specifically studies on women have been an integral part of and it is often associated with Sociology and the Social Science or sociological perspectives on gender itself has a global history. We will be able to trace the origin and growth of feminism that has been divided into the first, second, and third waves of feminism. So, it has a very specific historicity attached to that.. The feminist perspectives or gender studies also have had a very distinct historical trajectory in the Indian scenario. So, this week we will look into the works of some of the very eminent feminist scholars who trace these histories, who problematise the kind of relationship between feminism and Sociology, the gender studies and Sociology. So, it is a very, very interesting set of arguments and all of them are unanimous in their argument that gender studies or feminist perspective was very much missing in the initial phases of the growth of Sociology in India.

From the 1970s onwards, it was given an impetus and yet it actually deserves a lot of critical reflections about how or what is the relationship between these two disciplines. Are they distinct and to what extent the feminist epistemology and feminist critique or feminist reflexivity can actually strengthen the sociological perspectives? And again, the relationship between these two disciplines has not been very smooth and not been very easy. They were highly contested. There have been quite a lot of controversies among

scholars about the relevance or entirety of feminist perspectives within social theory. So, this actually gives you very interesting insights about the relationship between these two disciplinary perspectives.

So, we will take up a couple of essays written by some eminent gender studies scholars or feminist scholars in Sociology, the first essay is an introductory chapter written by Sharmila Rege. I hope you have heard her name. She was a very promising sociologist who unfortunately passed away at a much younger age. But she had made some substantial contribution to the Sociology of gender specifically on the questions of intersectionality, When you look at caste and gender and how they intersect in the everyday lives of people. Sharmila Rege is an important resource person for us. And in today's class, we are looking at this essay edited by Sharmila Rege. It's an edited work, Sociology of Gender : The Challenges of Feminist Sociological Knowledge. It is by sage publications.

We are looking at the specific introductory essay by Sharmila which is published in 2003. So, let us go to the essay.

It is a part of a series that was brought out as this golden jubilee celebration of Indian sociological society. And several important scholars came together and they So, these are the other books in this series. So, a series of scholars like Professor J. Ram, R.

S. Sandhu and P.M. Chacko and several others came together and edited specific volumes from the articles published in the Sociological Bulletin. I hope that the Sociological Bulletin is the official journal of Indian sociological society. So, the the editors went through all the articles published in the Sociological Bulletin till then.

Then they selected important articles, and then they brought out specific volumes. So, this particular book edited by Sharmila Rege is on Sociology of gender. It is titled The Sociology of Gender :The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Knowledge, edited by her and forwarded by Karuna Chanana, and it was published in 2003. So, I will just have a quick look at the contributors. It has Beatrice Kachauk, Patricia Uberoi G.

N. Ramu, Homa Hoodfar, Tipult Nongbri, Leela Dube, Raj Mohini Sethi, K.V. Kala, Pat Caplan, Karuna Chanana and Maitrayee Chaudhari and others. So, we are looking into the first essay that is the introductory essay edited by Sharmila Rege. Feminist Challenge to Sociology, Disenchanted Sociology or For Sociology.

That is the title that she has given. Now, I will be scrolling through the essay and I strongly urge you to read it. This book is widely available. There is no doubt that the re-emergence of feminism and the women's movement in the early 1970s had a significant impact on the discipline of Sociology.

So, in this first part, Sharmila traces the larger transformations in the international scenario of Sociology. She looks into how the International Sociological Association, the official or the most important body within the international realm, began to look at this question, and then they came up with more inclusive projects to bring in gender perspectives and others. So, ISA Research Committee 32, a committee on women's studies had been published in 1970s in response to the demand by feminist and women sociologists. Despite having taken up regional composition and internationalisation issues in the past, the WIS was not consulted. So, she brings up a series of incidents to argue that the integration of feminism into mainstream Sociology was always half-hearted.

It did not emerge from a genuine sense of integration or genuine sense of expanding one's own epistemological frameworks. Rather, it was a half-hearted attempt to bring in with a lot of reluctance. She says, even after these many years, even after 25 years we are just beginning to persist and call for a review of the seemingly obvious feminist challenge of the discipline. So, that is a fundamental argument that Sharmila Rege puts forward.

Sociologists and disciplines have been reluctant to integrate or to have an open dialogue with the feminist critique or the feminist challenge that posed by this discipline. And then she gives another example, this Gulbenkian Commission in Restructuring Social Sciences, another attempt which again sidelined this question and then went ahead with

their own agenda. The agency of feminist critique and scholarship is undermined by rendering the critical reconstitution as repetitions of earlier criticism.

Now, let us read what she has to say. Across the world, gender politics of second-wave feminism has been intertwined with the introduction of the concept of gender into the professional work of sociologists. The intellectual issues, therefore, cannot be divorced from the political in doing Sociology of gender. With the emergence of second-wave feminism and the slogan of personal is political, feminist social scientists began to underline the gaps between their experience as women and their sociological knowledge. And, this very important slogan that personal is political, which was a central slogan in the second wave of feminist argument, which refused to believe that you have a too distinct private and public life, which will not allow you to say that, okay, what I leave in my private life is matter only concerning to me, and I can have a different engagement in public, or it actually argue out that a person, a woman in particular, the personal life of the woman is also deeply political. Her private life, her private choices, her family life, her life within the gender roles, the relationship that she gets into, each of these things is deeply political. And that was a very important insight about the arguments about how even the personal life is deeply political. So, this was something very much against the conventional understanding that a person's personal life is different from that person's professional or public or political life. So, that was a conventional understanding. It also was a product of an increased critical gaze into one's own personal choices and personal life.

So, every scholar, for instance, or every woman, for instance, was motivated to look into their own personal life critically and then try to see how, as women, their choices and life chances are shaped in specific forms. So, they were all forced to see the political, the power or especially the patriarchal power in shaping their private and personal life. So, there was a call, or there was an argument that women scholars or women need to be politically active, politically conscious even about their own personal choices, about their private life, private sphere, their family life, their sexual relationship, the choices that they make in their own personal life. So, this particular argument, forced social scientist,

especially women social scientists to come to the understanding that their personal life is very closely connected with the larger structures of patriarchy and larger structures of gender relations. So, sociologists and their professional bodies were indicted for being androcentric and the hegemony of patriarchy in Sociology was elucidated.

So, despite the claim to the value neutrality, they argued Sociology was a 'malestream' discipline. This is an interesting term. It is not a mainstream discipline. It is a malestream discipline which had been mainly concerned with the research on men and its implications with theories for men. We know that those who have studied classical sociological theory know that we have hardly any important discussion on women by the early classical sociologists. It was always on the margin. Findings based on male samples had been generalised for the whole population, and issues and areas that concerned women were seen as personal and outside the purview of the academic. Even when women were included in the research, they were often presented in a sexist manner. Sex and gender were seldom seen as explanatory variables, and the explanatory theoretical paradigms often naturalised women's subordination on biological grounds. Women thus were hidden from sociological gaze, both theoretically and empirically. Feminist sociologists were concerned primarily with the underlining Sociology as the best sex-blind and at worst sexist.

So, despite the claim to be value neutral, Sociology, they argued, was a malestream discipline which had been mainly concerned with research on men and implications with theories for men. Findings based on all male samples had been generalised for their whole population, and issues and areas that concerned women were seen as personal and outside the purview of the academia. So, this was a significant trend in Sociology or for that matter, any Social Science when they refused to understand and accept women, their gender as an important category of analysis. It is not an objective analysis, not the question of whether you have included women in the sample, but it is much more than that.

Because in the evolution or in the beginning of this discipline, the gender was never

considered an explanatory category. Gender was never seen as a category that is capable of expanding your theoretical concerns. Gender was never seen as a category that was capable of expanding your idea about, say, for example, power, ideas about institutions, ideas about patriarchy, and ideas about social organisations. So, these understandings simply did not exist even when women were included in the research, they were often presented in a sexist manner.

Looking into this, as most of the early sociological studies focus on gender roles, these are permanently ascribed naturally given roles that women do certain kinds of work and men do certain work. And there was hardly any attempt to question this assumption that certain roles are by definition feminine or certain roles are by definition masculine. For example, the earlier studies on kinship and family or marriage or a host of other similar institutions did not question these underlying taken-for-granted assumptions. Sex and gender were seldom seen as explanatory variables, and the explanatory theoretical paradigms often naturalised women's subordination on biological grounds.

They were never questioned. As I mentioned, the division of labour or division of labour based on gender was taken for granted.

It was never questioned. It was seen as natural, socially acceptable and therefore non-problematic. It was seldom seen as explanatory variables, and explanatory theoretical paradigms often naturalised women's subordination on biological grounds. The argument is that women are of an inferior race maybe or they are an inferior category because of their physical weakness, and these assumptions were taken for granted and were hardly questioned. Women thus were hidden from sociological gaze both theoretically and empirically. It is a very important argument that women were hidden from the sociological gaze.

First of all, their issues were not addressed or seen as a social category that requires special focus or a more nuanced theoretical argument. Secondly, they were absent from the analysis. Thirdly, the whole explanatory potential that can be brought out by the by the category of gender was overlooked. Gender was seen as a category that does not have much of an explanatory potential. Feminist sociologists were concerned primarily

with underlying Sociology as, at best, sex-blind and, at worst, sexist.

So, sex blind, in a sense, a discipline that says that we are not concerned about gender or gender is not our priority or gender analysis is not something, our main focus or which blindly believes that we do not see any relevance of gender in this particular area. You say it is gender-blind because you think that it simply does not exist. You are blind to the existence of that. There are arguments about how a lot of scholarship is caste blind. When we say that Indian society is a modern society where caste does not have any place, it is the inability of the researcher to identify the prevalence of caste out there.

It is not that castes do not exist there, but castes are not observed, and the researcher simply does not have the ability to observe the more nuanced way in which castes work. So, similarly when you talk about a sex-blind researcher, it does not mean that sex or gender dynamics simply do not work there, but it is the inability of the researcher to acknowledge and identify and then theorise the more subtle and more nuanced ways in which gender and sex work. At the worst, Sexism was never problematised. Then, it was seen as a very natural argument. This was a period of disenchanting Sociology as the entire mainstream came to be declared as malestream. The absence of women in the cognitive structure of discipline was highlighted.

All efforts were directed towards establishing women's experience as significantly different from men's and incorporating women's perspectives as theorists and subjects of study. The feminist scholarship since these pioneering critiques are often organised into different phases or stages of transforming traditional Sociology. So, she now talks about how the conventional sociological theory understands the transformation of Sociology and its later integration into the women's studies. The first stage is seen as the one underlying the absence of women in the cognitive structure of the discipline.

That is something that we just discussed. The second stage is conceived as focusing on the differential sex roles and gender inequalities in society. The third stage is seen as one moving towards the conceptualisation of gender as a social structure, while the fourth stage is seen as one of realisation of the intrinsic linkage between gender and other matrices of structural inequalities. So, these are the these are the conventional ways in which the evolution of gender studies into Sociology is usually presented. The first is

marked by the mere absence of women in the cognitive structure of the discipline. Women do not constitute a society by default; they are a society composed of men. Of course, women are there, but they do not really require any specific attention or analysis. It is a taken for granted thing. The second stage is conceived as focusing on the differential sex roles and gender inequalities in society. It looks into different gender roles and gender inequality, but it is more taken for granted that this emerges from the different biological features and then is more natural. And the third stage is one moving towards the conceptualisation of gender as a social structure where more recognition is given.

And the fourth stage is seen as one of realisation of the intrinsic linkage between gender and other matrices of social inequality. So, the fourth one she says is the stage where you look at gender as a very important part of social structure and you cannot understand forms of social inequality that exists in religion or in class or in caste without really resorting to an analysis which includes gender as well. She is now a critic of this particular approach. This approach at first does not help to varied and vast ranges of feminist writings, scholarship, or other issues. Now, moreover, it is the fact that the scholars writing in the same period may, so to say, belong to different phases.

A more important fact is that feminist scholarship has been largely interdisciplinary and marginalised except in enclaves of women's studies. Men mean that they need a stage-by-stage transformation that is next to impossible. Some scholars, therefore, conceptualise the changes in terms of different intellectual genres rather than cumulative phases of stages. So, there are criticisms against this particular approach of looking into the stages.

She is talking about that. Therefore, feminist transformation in the discipline can be more adequately organised into different intellectual genres than into cumulative stages. Besides organising feminist critique of the discipline into different intellectual genres, it is important to categorise the responses of the discipline into these critiques. Now, there have been three broad responses to the feminist critique of the discipline of Sociology. One is questions about inclusion, separatism and reconceptualisation.

While the first response integrates women into the cognitive structures of the discipline, it leaves the assumption of the mainstream discipline unchallenged. Now, the first one is that society is composed not only of men; you also need to include women in your samples. When you study, say, for example, caste, you also need to bring to look into women, or when you study class, you also need to bring in women. When you take a sample, you also need to take a sample of women respondents. So, this becomes a more mechanical introduction of women without adequately understanding that women constitutes a separate gender and the gender is intrinsically capable of offering more critical perspectives.

It is capable of offering more critical pedagogies and critical methodologies. So, this particular realisation is simply absent in this first one. The second response, which is a separator's response, argues for the Sociology of Women from a women's standpoint. All women are seen as sharing a common position derived from their marginalisation and exploitation in a patriarchal society. So, the second one is a more vocal response from the feminists who argue that there has to be a Sociology of women as a separate domain or women's studies as a separate domain because women share a lot of common features.

Now, this emerges as a critique of the mainstream Sociology, not only as a critique against the non-inclusion of women, but the realisation or the argument that we women, because we share a common gender, we are distinctly different from that of the men and there are lot of things that we share among ourselves and thereby there has to be a separate Sociology of Women. The effort is to conceptualise the social world based on the experience of women. Such a position not only leaves the mainstream unchallenged, but also into a reverse way, reiterates the division of women to experience and men to carry. So, the second division of women to experience and men to. Sharmila argues that the problem with this particular approach or separatism is that it does not really challenge the mainstream Sociology.

It says that they do not understand women as an important category, so we have our own Sociology of Women and we will produce our own Sociology because we are different.

Now, that is why it leaves mainstream Sociology unchallenged but also, in a reverse way, reiterates the division of women to experience and men to theory because it says that since our lived experiences are different, we constitute differently. In terms of making a difference to the academic too, separatism can only lead to ghettoisation of feminist sociological knowledge. In terms of making a difference. Sharmila is very convinced that this argument that a Sociology of women has to have a separate identity and it has to be nurtured differently, which only leads to ghettoisation, where different scholars work separately, having not much of a conversation between them.

The third position of reconceptualisation seeks to move beyond filling in gaps and separate this knowledge. It seeks to integrate feminist challenge to the discipline in ways that lead to a reconceptualisation of sociological categories. From such a position, then the project is not one of mere inclusion of women, but of challenging some of the taken for granted dichotomies like public versus private or domestic versus paid work. Now, this is the most, maybe revolutionary or maybe the most promising possibility that many scholars are asking for. So, they would argue that the category of gender is a very potent explanatory category. It can problematise, and it can ask a lot of important questions. Many times, subversive questions about the taken-for-granted categories and theoretical assumptions within Sociology. And this will benefit every sociologist who is working in any field, whether somebody is working in the field of racism or religion or institutions of bureaucracy or power or poverty or casteism, in each of these categories, in each of these specialisations, the category of gender has the ability to complicate the taken for granted assumptions and then render it richer and more theoretically vibrant. So, from such a position, then the project is not one of mere inclusion of women but of challenging some of the taken-for-granted dichotomies like private versus public or domestic versus paid work. So, now, for example, if you look into some of the important theoretical assumptions and theoretical arguments from feminist scholarship about domestic work and then paid work, usually women's work at home was never recognised.

First of all, it was never paid. There is no remuneration associated with a housewife or our mothers or wives who do not go out for a paid work. It was not even seen as a work, categorised as a work. But now, recent scholarship has argued that it has, if it were to be

monetised, evaluated on the basis of actual remuneration, then it is a huge amount, the huge amount of work that is rendered by these women. So, when you talk about care work, the way in which women take care of elderly people or the emotional labour that is involved in it. So, this feminist framework has really been able to complicate many of these taken-for-granted dichotomies between domestic and paid work or between public and private.

What constitutes private and public has been criticised as if these were watertight compartments. Each of these positions may be seen as employing the different strategies of feminist theory. The first position of inclusion proposes to move towards a non-sexist Sociology through the inclusion of women. The second proposes strategy of reversal, the reworking of sociological knowledge from the standpoint of women, thereby moving towards particularly of women's Sociology. The third position of reconceptualisation often operates through a strategy of displacement, so that the deconstructive technique may be employed to challenge accepted meanings.

That is exactly the same thing that we discussed. Nevertheless, displacement alone may not be an adequate basis for reconceptualisation, which is an ongoing and uphill struggle. Sharmila argues that this deconstruction of existing categories will not be sufficient, but gender studies or feminist studies must be able to construct or positively contribute better, more nuanced and more sensitive categories and theoretical frames. In the last two decades or more, the central category of women in feminist theorisation has come to be challenged as a homogenised notion. Trends in postmodern feminism have assumed a nominalist position and have challenged the use of the category of women as essentialists. Again, the recent scholarship in women's studies, especially in the last four decades, from the 1980s onwards, there has been increasing scholarship that challenges the idea that all women, because they are women, experience similar issues from the patriarchal system or this whole idea about a universal sisterhood, every women in the world suffer similarly, they share the similar life and they are similar. So, that argument has been criticised very heavily, at least for the last three or four decades. We have had black feminism, we have had feminism from the third world, Dalit feminism and we

have had Islamic feminism. So, each of these categories really complicates the argument that all women are the same or that all women constitute a singular category. Several trends in black and third-world feminism, starting with Chandra Mohanty's essay and a lot of other work in this field.

The postmodernists argue that feminist goals could not be conceptualised in terms of the needs and interests of white middle-class women. Black feminist sociologists like P. H. Collins underlined how different epistemologies promote different groups' interest and how oppositional knowledge is suppressed. So, the major critique that emerged was that the feminist knowledge that was produced in the West was the knowledge by and about the liberal white woman.

That was theorised as the feminism of women across the world, which is not true. So, that is why there is a huge criticism against the Western liberal, especially liberal feminism, saying that these feminism really represent the white women, middle-class white women of the West and not that of brown women, not that of women in the third world, not of the black women, Muslim women and Dalit women. So, that criticism began to emerge seriously. She talks about this in the introductory section. Now, I think I will take a pause here. We will conclude this session and then we will complete this remaining section in the coming class.