

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

Dr. Santhosh R

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Week-09

Lecture-43

Feminist Research: Redefining Methodology in the Social Sciences

Welcome back to the class. As we are in the module that looks into the influence of feminist theory and feminist studies on Indian Sociology, we had a discussion on the same topic by Sharmila Rege. We looked into the introduction written by her for an edited work, which compiled the essays that appeared in the Sociological Bulletin, the journal of Indian Sociological Society. In that lengthy introductory essay, Sharmila Rege traces the history of the association between feminist scholarship and Indian Sociology and the challenges and difficulties that they had to face. In today's class as well, we are following the similar line.

This is an essay by Aparna Rayaprol and it is titled Feminist Research, Redefining Methodology in Social Sciences. This has less to do with the interaction between Sociology and feminist theory in India but rather more of a theoretical argument about what feminist epistemology means, what questions can be asked from a feminist theoretical standpoint, and what feminist theoretical perspective. The latter part of the essay also has some reflections on Prof. Aparna's own engagement with the field and how she conducted her fieldwork in Pittsburg among the Indian diaspora in that place.

This essay appeared in Contributions to Indian Sociology, as we discussed earlier, one of the most prestigious journals on Indian society established by Dumont and Pocock, which is still considered one of the very important leading Sociology journals. In this article, we will discuss how feminist perspective is not only possible but also necessary in all

social research. It is problematic that sociological research claims to be reflexive while turning its lens on the other but falls short of questioning its own social location. And this is something that we discussed in yesterday's class and we are going to discuss the same in the coming class when we discuss an essay by Professor Sujatha Patel, where this whole question of the claim of Sociology as being a reflective Social Sciences is often challenged or further complicated by scholars from different standpoint and scholarly position who point out the major omissions and relations that become the central feature of the practice of Indian Sociology. Feminist methodologies are not outside the sociological enterprise but must be seen as a significant part of it.

If the sociological method has given analytical rigour to feminist work, it is a feminist perspective that has completely transformed sociological understanding. Research on women's issues has gradually evolved into research that problematised gender, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of systematic marginalisation through forces of domination, such as patriarchy, colonialism, casteism and racism. This essay focuses more on the theoretical and methodological questions and the origin of feminist methodology. Feminist researchers have argued that firstly, traditional social theories have often marginalised or rendered insignificant women's life world.

In rare cases of inclusion of women's experiences and conceptual schemes, they have been distorted. Secondly, feminist scholars argued that mainstream Social Sciences research tended to incorporate gender or, more problematically, sex as only one of the many sociological variables under study. By doing that, gender becomes a mere referential point without assuming centrality. And this is a point I think we have discussed several times. This has been pointed out by almost every feminist scholar, who argued that in the initial classical sociological period, as well as subsequently, the social was understood as the domain of men.

It did not even occur to them that women as important or equal representatives or partners in this whole affair need to be acknowledged and then studied significantly. Even that realisation was not available. So, women have been marginalised or rendered insignificant in women's life world. In rare cases of inclusion of women's experience in

conceptual schemes, they have been distorted. Secondly, feminist scholars argued that the mainstream social sciences research tended to incorporate gender or, more problematically, sex as only one of the many sociological variables under study.

So, in typical social science research, you will put a lot of variables, for example, ethnicity, nationality, caste, religion, age group, education, and health standard. Gender was also seen as just yet another category, which provides you with certain understanding about the population, without really problematising or incorporating much larger, insightful, ideas that could have been gained by keeping gender as a very important central category and an explanatory category. Women scholars, too, have long been absorbed by the dominant rules of sociological method and have not been exceptional in their approach to studying theory and research. So, we are looking into that.

She elaborates on Sandra Harding's very important arguments about standpoint theory, and we will engage with that more elaborately when we look into a very interesting debate between Sundar Sarukkai and Gopal Guru. We will also have an essay by Sharmila Rege, where she talks about Dalit feminist standpoint theory. So, standpoint theory is very important. It has been considered to be one of the very important interventions in the recent methodological debates. In the subsequent sections, she invokes Sandra Hardings and then tries to elaborate on what exactly are the feminist methodological perspectives.

So, feminist sociology insists on the central analytical category of gender, without which key concerns in the social disciplines, such as work, politics, education and religion, cannot be studied satisfactorily. So, this is a very important concern. It is not that when you study religion when you study state or when you study politics or when you study education, you also look into gender. It does not work in that way or that is not how gender must be studied. On the other side you need to look at these things through the perspective of gender, then this very phenomenon itself might appear very differently or in other words, gender has the ability to offer explanatory paradigms.

So, an absence of a gender perspective would certainly provide you with only a limited understanding of the substance or the theme that you are going to study. So, that is a very different claim. You are not trying to understand how you need to incorporate gender in the analysis of a substantive theme, but rather taking up the perspective of gender to analyse a larger theme would be much more productive and important.

Clues to unravelling this relationship between feminism and Sociology can be found in the feminist sociology of knowledge. Sandra Harding's typology of feminist epistemologies is a good starting point. She delineates three distinct epistemological positions. One is feminist empiricism, second is feminist standpoint theory and third is feminist postmodernism. So, we are going to discuss these three things in more detail.

Now, feminist empiricism identifies Androcentrism and sexism as social biases which need to be corrected by stricter adherence to rules of scientific enquiry. , this is a very important argument that comes from the basic realisation that all social sciences has been Androcentric. It all revolves around men.

It is all produced by men, and it is for men, and that needs to be corrected. An initial premise of feminist empiricism is that you need to look at the empirical world, which is also constituted by female and non-male entities and has not been adequately addressed or understood, but that has to be understood and taken into account. Hardings point out that feminist empiricists work from the basic principle that both sexes contribute to the evolution of our species. So, there is a call for the inclusion of women as both the researchers and the research, both the researched and the researcher. Now, we can say that maybe this emerged immediately after the emergence of classical sociological theory, say from 1900 onwards or 1910 and 1920 onwards. The classical theory has been a fiefdom of males, and it is produced by males, and it is about them.

It is even oblivious to the existence of non-male categories or genders or other categories. So, feminist empiricism asks for a corrective step by providing equal focus or adequate focus to the voices as well as inclusion of women out there, both as the researcher as well as the research. It calls for an increasing number of women

researchers, and it also calls for an increasing number of focus on women subjects. This research sought to generate good science, which by definition is not gender blind; it involves adding women to existing research agendas and giving recognition to them in their respective fields, the point that we discussed.

Now, this perspective is critical of the dominant mode of scientific inquiry for neglecting gender and women's concerns and suggests that this bias could be corrected by more rigorous empirical research. The point that we discussed that they believed that a true researcher, an authentic scientific research should be able to overcome all these biases and again bias is a very innocent term. It tells you that, either consciously or unconsciously, certain sections of things have been overlooked. So, now they want more of a rigorous scientific approach that will naturally overcome this bias, sex and later gender are variables.

The studies in social stratification, for example, intergenerational mobility which was originally measured by examining father-son occupational profiles changed to include women, family, racial and immigrant profiles. However, this work often resulted in correcting facts rather than providing a deeper understanding of the real reasons for gender inequality. The agenda of this particular feminist empiricism is very limited. It wants to look into women's issues, or it wants more women also to be part of the research.

So, it ends there. It does not have more ambitious or more adventurous or more larger claims about changing the very way in which the discipline itself is constituted. Those kinds of promises or those kinds of arguments are simply absent. The Commission on Status of Women in India was set up to understand women's status in education, health and other social parameters. So, it talks about how this got translated in India, where more commissions and more official attention were paid to the questions of women and other non-male genders. The second more important and more promising framework is what is understood as feminist standpoint theory.

And as I mentioned, this standpoint theory is a very, very important introduction

intervention in the methodological debates, which we will take up very extensively. Standpoint feminists argue that the theoretical perspective offered by them and the methods they use to analyse society are from the perspective of the subjugated gender. They are different from the feminist empiricists because for them knowledge is grounded in experience. The standpoint perspective dominated gender-centric sociological research in many parts of the world. Now, what is the feminist standpoint theory argues? Feminist standpoint theory argues that the mere mechanical inclusion of women into your research is not sufficient.

For example, if you are conducting a study on poverty, you conduct a survey among 10 males and then to balance that, you survey 10 women, then that is not sufficient. According to feminist empiricism, that would have been sufficient because you give equal importance to both genders. But feminist standpoint theory argues that it is different because how the poverty is experienced and how poverty impinges on the lives of these women are very different from how poverty is experienced by men and how poverty impinges on the lives of the men. Women, because of their experiences, are different either as working women or non-working women, women who are confined to their domestic sphere or women who have to balance both domestic as well as public sphere. Their very experience can be very different, and this experience is something central to the theorisation of social theory. So, standpoint theory focuses on the experiences of different sections of people, the lived experience of different sections of people and how these different lived experiences could be very different even within a seemingly singular category.

For example, women or Dalit or Black people, they constitute a different standpoint, but within their own standpoint there could be further different points. A sociology of women preserves the presence of subjects as knowers and actors. It does not transform subjects into objects of study or make use of the conceptual devices of eliminating the active presence of the subjects. Its method and analytical procedures seek to preserve the presence of the active and experiencing subject. As sociology deals with human beings, their identities are ones that are primal.

The standpoint perspective enables the researcher to get off his high horse. So, here you understand that the people whom you are dealing with, the people whom you are studying, they have their own subjectivities, they experience social reality differently and you as a researcher, you need to be extremely sensitive to understand the world of the subject through their own views. So, a social and cultural and political milieu in which these people live or in these people are situated are something so important that provide them with a specific understanding and experience of the social reality. So, the standpoint perspective enables the researcher to get off his high horse and approach the field as a learner willing to listen more, than assume realities. Standpoint theories are critical of positivist social science as it tends to adopt a hierarchical approach with the researcher transmitting knowledge to his respondents in a rather orientalist fashion.

And the positivism has been criticised very rigorously because it believes in an infallibility of a scientific paradigm, scientific knowledge and it understands that the researcher has the ability to come to very objective and true reality. Truth about how people live and the people's own perspective is seen as less credible or less worthy. Women's response must be seen, it argues not only objects of positivist enquiry but as partners in social research. So, the approach was of subjectivity and conscious partiality rather than value neutrality. Now, this again is a very interesting long drawn debate about whether Sociology is an objective science?

I hope you remember the Weberian intervention about objectively studying subjective values, though he was critical of the early positivist position. But here it takes a very clear position that sociology cannot claim that it will be a truly objective position rather it is deliberately partial towards women or towards subjugated people. It does not claim to be neutral and treating everybody equal because treating everybody equal amounts to mostly taking side with the dominant group. That is how it works in most of the social settings. So, they are deliberately partial towards the dominant, towards the dominated group because their own experiences need to be further theorised to understand the way in which they live.

Dorothy Smith and other standpoint feminists have adopted the Marxian vision in which science can reflect upon the ways the world is and work towards human emancipation. For Marxists, it was through struggles in the workplace that the proletariat would generate knowledge. However, in mainstream Marxism, women never seemed to be part of the proletariat in any explicit manner. Women's emotional or reproductive labor was rendered invisible as were women's roles as social agents in the production of knowledge. The amount of feminist criticism on certain crude versions of Marxism or even classical Marxism is something very remarkable because gender was not a concern of the early, of Marx himself to a large extent and to the subsequent Marxists.

Standpoint feminism sees women as the agents of knowledge. Women's experience becomes resources for a social analysis and it is women who should be able to reveal what women's experience really are. In the 70s and 80s, men doing gender studies was not a common phenomenon and it is quite heartening that in the contemporary world, standpoint feminism has moved into consciously doing gender studies with research on masculinity and men doing feminism. That transformation is something important. The subjugated gender cannot be seen as part of a binary opposition with the other gender.

But it should be seen as Smith insists, within the relations of ruling of particular context. It is talking about how there are structural inequalities in a particular setting and how it has to be seen? how that structure constitutes certain relations of ruling? The concept of relations of ruling focuses our attention on forms of knowledge, organised social institutions and practices and questions of agency, consciousness and experience. And how these structural arrangement by default would promote and protect certain interests at the cost of others. This perspective deters analysis of gender from positing the universal standpoint of women as opposed to that of the men and allow them to recognise that there are multiple standpoints located in the intersections of caste, class, race, gender and religion.

Therefore standpoints of women are particular to their specific context and experience. And this is again something that we discussed. By 1980s there was a realisation that the

feminist scholarship needs to take cognisance of the media diversity of the women whom they are talking about. As I was telling you in the previous class, the whole project of creating a universal sisterhood seemed to be impossible because the women's own experiences are very different.

So, based on all these things. Women share certain experiences as women because men in all cultures assign certain otherness to them. Women however are differentiated along the lines of caste, race, class and religion and might find more similarities with men in their respective social relations rather than the women of other group. So, you can just easily understand that the women from an upper caste, upper class elite background and women from a lower caste and lower class category, their concerns would be very, different.

Their lived experience would be very different. The way in which they navigate the life would be very, very different. So despite the fact that they all are women, the parameters of caste, class and social position, privilege, status, all these things render their lives entirely different. Recognising this aspect of difference, standpoint feminists do not propagate some kind of feminine essentialism, which assumes that all women share common experience. So, this again is a very interesting one because at least there are some feminist strand which tend to portray that every woman has certain essential qualities, say like caring or affectionate, emotional.

These were seen as of nurturing. So, these are seen essentially feminine qualities that only women can have as opposed to that of men. And Aparna makes a reference about Vandana Shiva, who is a very important proponent of such a position, very critically. Because Vandana Shiva is a scholar in the field of ecology. So, many of her arguments tend to present that the women are better capable of protecting the nature because by very nature they nurture, they are more caring and are more affectionate. So, those arguments are seen as an over romanticised versions of certain essentialism, which many sociologists do not agree with.

As scholars such as Mohanty argued, for alliances to be forged between women of

colour, the universal sisterhood team that had informed the earlier impetus phase had to be fade from feminist enquiry, especially in the Indian context. The standpoint perspective has also been critiqued by black feminist sociologist Collins for a privileging experience of the white middle-class woman. So, we mentioned that how the liberal feminism was, though it was presented as a version of the women of the whole world, but later it was turned out to be that it is nothing but which is standing for the white middle-class, , urban woman in the in the West. She drew our attention to the marginality by race and class as well.

So, it is familiar. So, in the subsequent paragraphs, Aparna Yayaprol puts out certain kind of examples from Indian academia, how certain attempts were made in this. She talks about Urvashi Butalia's contribution based on oral histories. In fact, the publication house that was set up by Butalia and Ritu Menon in the 1980s, Kali for Women, it is a very important publishing house which published quite a lot of very important work on women's scenario in India, without going for some of the very celebrated publishing houses. So, this was set up as an exclusion, as a very, important platform for the young Indian for the women scholars to talk about the women's issues. And later the sister organisation Zubaan publication.

Another reference about women 's studies in India from standpoint perspectives include Susi Tharu and Lalita. This was a massive exercise to unearth poetry, fiction, drama and autobiographies written by women in 11 different languages spanning 2000 years and offer them to readers in English. Then of course, the work by Sharmila Rege, her work on Dalit women's struggles and resistance in Maharashtra, rigorously interrogated and attempted to transform sociological analysis in India. We could very confidently say that Sharmila Rege was one of the very important scholar who made very important interventions in this field. So, for Rege, her classroom was a political space and her text was literally weapons of the weak.

Her critical and in-depth analysis showed that the caste and gender cannot be privileged over class. But in fact intersects each other in complex ways. Her methodology of doing research among Dalits, particularly women are reflected in recent debates between Guru and Sarukkai. So, we are going to take up that essay in the coming class.

Her work on feminist standpoint will be discussed in the class. Now, the third point, she highlights is the feminist postmodernism and intersectionality. So, feminist postmodernism goes further than standpoint feminism in tackling questions of difference. Postmodernism challenges the claims of universalism of any sort, including feminism. Postmodernists and feminists share a scepticism towards any universalising claims regarding the existence, nature and power of reason, progress, science, language and the subject self. So, this is again a very complex terrain where any sort of universal framework, universal slogans, universal ideas are deconstructed and then rendered impossible.

So, the ideas of the emancipatory potentials of reason, progress, science, all these things are critiqued very vehemently. It is suggested that multiple differences be taken into account in theorising without privileging anyone, gender or race or class over the others. But one of the problems that standpoint feminist and others have with postmodernism is that as we get caught up in postulating endless difference, gender loses its centrality. This is one of the major criticism against the postmodern scholarship because it is preoccupied with difference and it is preoccupied with creating more and more sub-identities or alternative identities at the end. There is no end to that because if you keep on fragmenting, you say that women do not constitute a homogenous one, so you talk about the Dalit women. You say that the Dalit women's experience is different. But again, Dalit women themselves do not constitute a singular category, you fragment it, you look into sub-caste questions. And within sub-caste again, a group of women who belong to a particular sub-caste need not experience a similar situation. Then you bring in class, you bring in marginal differences. So, at the end of the day, what you will have is an endless list of differences or sub-identities which is incapable of mounting a concerted political fight. So, the politics is lost, the potential to forge alliance and then come united under certain, slogans against very powerful entities like patriarchy or state is lost in its preoccupation with creating innumerable numbers of fragmented identities and difference.

This is a very important criticism. Some feminists have viewed this development coming at a moment when feminist theory was just beginning to get accepted in the mainstream academia as potentially damaging to the feminist politics. Spivak showed how even the subaltern articulations marginalised women. In the Indian context, for instance, the 1900s and early 20th century were periods when the caste lens became more important axis of empirical investigation and gender was either subsumed or taken for granted in the politically engaged scholarship. However, concurrently, there has been intellectual contributions that reiterate the centrality of gender as an axis of subordination. The intersectional approach combined the multiple standpoint perspectives with the importance of social location.

The earlier work on endangered labours within the field, the subfield of migration and diasporic studies almost completely erased the process of female endangered labours. The plantation worker was male and often black, but gender became an axis of marginality only later. Now, Tejaswini Niranjana's work in the diaspora in the Caribbean is given an example. And then similarly, that of Kalpana Kanabiran's work brings together the interdisciplinary perspectives on women and law with a focus on women's rights in legal, social and economic institutions.

Globalisation and trajectories of migration, women workers and dependent migrant becomes the focus of feminist scholarship. Now, she talks about Margaret Abraham's sociological work which focuses on the role of coalitions in lobbying to provide better legal protection for abused immigrant women. So, basically the argument is while postmodernism quarrels with the tyranny of labels, the scholars have realised that giving away the category of gender is suicidal as it would take away the potential for any politics from that category. And if you are completely engrossed and engulfed with the idea of differences and then how difference is produced, then at the end it becomes an empty exercise. In order to do gender sensitive and meaningful sociological research one needs to adopt appropriate methods of sociological enquiry to suit the needs of the research question.

The goal is to make visible something that is invisible and to consciously move the

margins to the center. The so-called trivial has to be made important. For instance, women's interpretation of other women and their conversation that were written as gossip by androcentric scholarship have now become important research material. So, the latter part of this essay she provides a similar examples in that.

Now, feminist ethnography normally consists of three goals. To document the activities and lives of women, to understand and present women's experience from their own viewpoints and to interpret women's behaviour as an expression of their particular social context. Feminist field work is similar to other fieldwork that entails active involvement of the researcher in the production of social knowledge through direct participation in the activities. She/he is attempting to comprehend. However, feminist field workers find the necessity of continuously and reflexively attending to the significance of gender as a basic feature of understanding the social realities of men and women. In the early days, feminist researchers believed in giving voice to the experiential realities of women, especially from the marginalised or subaltern sections. The researcher herself is a gendered being and reflexive approach allows for a greater empathy with the respondents.

There is a move away from the rigidity of the scientific temper to a more open approach. So, this is yet another very important contribution that the feminist framework has brought in because it tells you that you as a researcher is also a human being coming from certain specific locations and that reflexivity is not only about the subject which you are going to study, but also you as a researcher. Now, this is a discussion about reflexivity. Early works in language studies have been critiqued by feminist scholars by looking at the use of sexist language and the complete erasure of not just the female subject, but of the derogatory ways in which abuse in many languages in the world is directed at women. This led sociologists of education also to critically examine textbooks and gender stereotypes perpetuated in the theme as well as gender language.

In the contemporary academic world, it is feminist work that has recognised diversity and scored well at representation. Feminist scholars have worked with the Subaltern

studies, Community studies, Dalit and Tribal studies to be able to provide a holistic understanding that enable ongoing critique of Adrocentric scholarship and she invokes Anandi's work among the Caste Panchayaths among the Dalits in Tamil Nadu. , now again this part talks about how the feminist research methodology actually has entered into new terrain with the arrival of digital forms Facebook, Twitter or YouTube or various platforms which actually provide you with the opportunity to access women which were not available.

The 'Self-reflexivity, lessons from research on women in the Indian diaspora' is the author's own reflection about her own experience of having done fieldwork among the Indian diaspora communities in Pittsburgh that was her PhD thesis. So, it is an interesting discussion but I am not going into that though it is valuable due to the paucity of time. So, this essay was something important because it brought it lot of importance. It talked about the specific contributions of feminist methodology and how it actually complicates social science research in general and sociological research in particular.

It also brings in lot more different kinds of moralities and ethics in the process of research. Being an anti-positivist in character also ask the researcher to be more humble and more sensitive and more open-minded and more reflexive about her own life as well as that of the life that the researcher is planning to study. So, let me stop here and we will meet for the coming class. Thank you.