

# A Fieldworker in Women's Studies

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## I

A decade and a half after the International Women's Year is not too early for some enquiry and introspection into what, for lack of a better phrase, have been the gains and losses. Any such assessment can be pitched at various levels - Individual, collective or Institutional and of course viewed from a range of perspectives. This essay is an account of a personal as well as an intellectual journey. Beginning with a brief overview of an understanding of women's studies, the paper goes on to a more personalized description of my involvement in this area of research and activism.

By questioning existing structures whether within the home or outside, women's studies has provided its practitioners with a distinctive way of looking at the world. It is not important whether they continue to work in the field or not. What is relevant is that wherever they are and will be, their views will be those born of a range of experiences during a vital period of their lives. For when the personal and that which does not directly affect one, find affinity, the outcome is bound to be an almost irreversible change in perceptions and expectations. This, perhaps more than many other transient successes, is what remains, a much valued gain for those who have cared to search for other answers.

The move towards a re-evaluation of established methodologies and theoretical premises (Blackburn, 1972; Bruner, 1983, Ganguli, 1974; Geertz, 1973, 1982, 1992, Institute of Economic Growth, 1982, D.P. Mukherjee, 1959; R. Mukherjee, 1979, Stone and Campbell, 1984; Turner and Bruner, 1986:), helps to contextualise women's studies in a wider intellectual framework. The development of a discourse on women in the academy appears inextricably linked to the development of the women's movement. Indeed, some believe that women's studies is a response to the need to provide the women's movement with a theoretical foundation (Bonder, 1982: Chow, 1989: Desai et al. 1982: Evasco, 1988, Karlekar, 1983). All of this, however sounds a bit like putting the proverbial cart before the horse: in the first instance, we need to establish what we mean by women's studies.

Definitions of new interests are often many and at times contradictory, if not confusing. Put simply, women's studies which was talked of as an area of research, teaching and action

only after 1975, the International Women's Year, concentrates on gender as a category of analysis in the same manner that caste, religion, class and status groups have so far been used by social scientists (Abbott and C. Wallace, 1990, Agarwal, 1986a; Kalpagam, 1986; Lockwood, 1986; Moore, 1988; R. Wallace, 1989). It is now generally accepted that while 'sex' refers to physiological distinctions, gender is "a cultural construct, a set of learned behaviour patterns" (Caplan, 1987: 1). Women's studies emphasises that a focus on gender as a category of analysis means that it now becomes an Important indicator within studies where the focus may be on other variables. Thus, in order to provide a complete picture of peasant uprisings or of a tribal or 'native' community there is a need to look not only at class and ethnic factors, but also at gender as a significant variable. In emphasising the need for social scientists to be gender-sensitive, women's studies is staking a claim to restructure entire knowledge systems and social science methodologies (V. Mazumdar, 1987; Millman and Kanter, 1975; Smith, 1989).

Again, there is an important body of opinion which believes that incorporation in existing disciplines as courses or papers may be preferable to marginalisation (some call it ghettoization) as a relatively new, independent area of study. These debates which were intuited some years ago (Bowles and Dvelli Klein. 1983; Desai, et al. 1982; SIGNS, 1982; Stimpson, 1982) raise important questions not only on the status of women's studies but also on the identity of those interested in this growing area. Increasingly, many women's studies scholars are those who have established themselves in various disciplines prior to their interest in this new area. A study of women's lives lends itself to interdisciplinary methodology, analysis and networking. ideally, to work across disciplines. a researcher needs to be familiar with more than one subject. This is not always possible particularly as academic requirements stress specialisation in a single area (Agarwal, 1986 a). Nonetheless, in sociology and social anthropology for instance, economic anthropology, political sociology, sociologies of religion, education, medicine and so on, stretch across disciplines: similar exercises increasingly characterise women's studies as scholars look to new data sources and methodologies to enrich their areas of work. It is possible of course that in the process researchers may be open to criticism from purists in various parent disciplines. However, this is a risk worth taking as research across disciplines often results in investigations into hitherto neglected areas and the emergence of new perspectives. Essential for interdisciplinary research is the use of a range of methodologies, many of which are relatively new. These are some of the challenges which the women's studies scholar has to recognise and take on.

Is women's studies different from a range of earlier studies which have focused on women? Can studies in the social sciences prior to 1975 which deal with the status of women,

their employment, education, multiple roles, patterns of marriage and so on also be regarded as work in women's studies? One answer to these questions would be that if such studies do not envisage women as an oppressed category, they do not fall within the ambit of this new area of work. This answer can be countered by a further question: is it necessary to have a prior belief in the existence of subjugation, oppression and discrimination for work on gender to qualify as women's studies? Or is it important to read, study and analyse a problem in accordance with the norms of certain rigorous theoretical and research methods and then come to conclusions based on relevant findings? But are these two approaches mutually exclusive? Is it not time to acknowledge that no activity can be free from the intellectual, social and ethical baggage of the teacher the learner, the reader ... ? That commitment to a cause and intellectual rigour can go together? A related question asks whether women's studies belongs to academia alone the way for instance quantum physics does? Or can it also justifiably imply action, intervention and consciousness-raising in the interests of justice and equity? If these are broadly defined to include a conscientious teacher's or researcher's committed handling of the subject matter and students, then most would agree that women's studies like some facets of other social science disciplines, involves action. Here action and intervention imply the teacher's ability to influence the thinking of her or his students as well as of the impact of research findings On Policy formulation and administrative strategies in other words, women's studies further restates a belief that knowledge creation has to reflect perceptions of the real world with all its warts and blemishes.

An approach on which there is less agreement is one which defines action as working for structural change. Here the external agent acts as a catalyst. That this agent may be a researcher is evident from the increasing popularity of the participatory research method. Maintaining that "actors in the situation are not merely objects of someone else's study but are actively influencing the process of knowledge generation and elaboration", participatory research challenges notions of objectivity, neutrality and value free judgements (Tandon, 1981:21). The situation thus represented is the product of the collaborative processes of researcher and respondent (Fals Borda, 1979, 1981, Freire, 1970, 1974; Rehman, 1985). Participatory research has been used effectively for instance, In women's studies (N. Banerjee, 1984, Harding, 1987; Lather, 1988; V. Mazumdar; 1989 and forthcoming, Roberts, 1981; K. Sharma, 1986), the sociology of education (Jackson and Jackson, 1979, La Belle, 1987) and the study of movements and grassroots organisations (Muntemba, 1985; Omvedt, 1979; Touraine 1983). We already know that critiques of existing methods, frameworks and viewpoints are being questioned, and not only by those in women's studies. The limitations of an approach

which speaks of objective distance, of facts alone, and of absolute truths have already been mentioned. Scholars such as Sandra Harding (1987) point out that so-called objectivity is in fact the objectivity of male discourse. It is now time to make space for the feminist standpoint, to redefine objectivity. One of the practical fall-outs of this disillusionment with established post-enlightenment modes of thought is the projection of the subject as an active agent in the construction of knowledge. Methodologically, the voice of the observer, of the student and of the teacher, becomes as important as that of the object of study. To hear that voice, the methodological tools of literary and autobiographical analysis (Basu, 1990; Benstock, 1988; Braxton, 1990; Karlekar, 1991; Heilbrun, 1988; Lakshmi, 1984; M. Mukherjee, 1988; Rao, 1990; Sangari and Vaid, 1989), oral histories, (Bodnar, 1989; Stree Shakti Sangathana, 1989; Vansina, 1965), life histories (Agar, 1980 b; Bhave, 1989; Crapanzano et al. 1986; Das Gupta et al, 1990, Geiger: 1986; Modell, 1983; 1987; Robertson, 1983) and case studies (Desai, 1991; Jetley 1988; Gulati 1981; Mitra, 1988) become vital. More specifically, women's studies has much to share with the fieldwork-based traditions in sociology and social anthropology: in fact, notions of objectivity versus subjectivity of taking sides and yet trying to remain 'intact' and ultimately questions on the role of the field worker are those which have concerned sociologists and social anthropologists for some decades now (Agar, 1980 a; Bruner, 1983; Geertz, 1973, 1982, 1992; Leach, 1961; Malinowski, 1961; Srinivas, 1966; 1983; Turner and Bruner, 1986).

Women's studies does not claim exclusive rights to any of these approaches: at the time, its emphasis on reflexivity on knowledge as shared experience has led to its use in unique and distinctive ways. Today, it shares much with postmortem discourse, but draws the line at a total loss of context and the demise of the subject. It finds attractive the belief that the observer and the observed, the teacher and the taught, the reader and the text collaborate in the act of interpretation and creation. A dialogue and a mutuality characterise these relationships, but, caution anthropologists for instance these must be within the parameters of location and context (di Leonardo, 1991; Gal, 1991, Stacey, 1988; Strathern, 1987 a; Mascia-Lees et al 1989). Feminist anthropologists Marilyn Strathern, Micaela di Leonardo and Susan Gal point to the lack of parity between the authorship of the anthropologist and the informant (Strathern, 1987:281). In other words, my authorship of a piece of writing is the product of my specific context, my background, my experience.

The quest for common creations sometimes overlooks that the one initiating the process is often a woman from an advantaged social, educational and even racial background. She brings a specific baggage with her despite her best attempts at incorporating the other into discourse. For, her world view, categories of analysis, dialogic tools modes of translation are

determined by her culture and training (Gal, 1991, Geertz, 1992: Goody, 1992, Smith, 1989). Thus the new reality of the one the researcher/teacher hopes to have created through the involved participation of her respondents/students may in fact reflect a privileged view, her understanding of another's world. While this dilemma characterizes any situation where one attempts to represent the Other, it is particularly significant when a vast divide separates those in an essentially hierarchical relationship. Nor need it be limited to contexts of First World researcher and Third World researched alone (Asad, 1973: Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, 1992). The differences and inequalities within one's own culture can equally pose a moral dilemma for those involved in the act of creating a new reality.

In an interesting interface with Clifford Geertz, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and others. Jack Goody is concerned with the loss of context and "a wider frame" (Goody, 1992). In short, enough thought is not only not given to the situated observer and where she has come from, but giving space to essentialism and the narrowly local can ultimately be limiting and inward-looking. To elaborate on these points a bit more: in their commitment to look for other voices, postmodernism can logically justify religious fundamentalism and a range of cultural beliefs about femininity and masculinity. In some senses, these are inevitable developments of an intellectual freedom of a very special kind. At the same time it is necessary to be aware of the dangers of extreme relativism.

All of this is not to suggest that the time has come to ring down the curtains on any activity which involves interfacing with those in different life situations. It is only to acknowledge that there can never be any perfect piece of research nor any one reality. Women's studies is uniquely situated to join this exciting debate as an active partner. The fact that most researchers and teachers in the area are women provides an umbilical link between theory and praxis. As a woman and as a social anthropologist I consider myself particularly privileged in having been able to participate in this dynamic process. I need hardly add that much of the questioning went on within myself ; often enough, colleagues and friends were coopted as sounding boards into the process of self-enquiry: soon enough, we had newer areas of sharing and common experience. The next section is an expression of this reflective process. As it covers a large part of my adult life, it is necessarily selective and at times perhaps cryptic in detail: but then, there are surely areas in most people's lives which often enough remain shrouded, repressed, even to the individuals themselves.

## II

When my children were born in the Seventies I was clear that I would send them to a co-educational school. My husband and I had been to single sex missionary and convent schools and felt that it was much more 'healthy' for boys and girls to mix freely together from an early age. We have never regretted the decision. Interestingly, though our son occasionally says that he wished he had spent a few years in that bastion of male privilege, an exclusive public school, I do not think that he's terribly serious. Our daughter feels that she has gained much from being in a mixed school, and I think she's right.

As the daughter of a civil servant, I have lived most of my life in Delhi. When I was growing up my parents felt that a girl's school and later college, were de rigour. Strangely enough, my elder sister had been sent to an innovative mixed school. I did not question parental judgement, though I had once or twice rather halfheartedly said that I would much rather have studied in an on campus women's college. A co-educational institution was never mentioned. My wish was rejected out of hand, I was never given a reason, but I suspect in part it was the proximity to men's colleges which deterred my parents. The very same parents who three years later were delighted when I got admission to the University of Oxford: clearly, the chance of an education in one of the best universities of the world took precedence over doubts regarding the safety of the environment, and of course, one could not rule out influence of the colonial legacy and parental pride that one's child had made it to where the best in the empire were educated.

I greatly enjoyed my two years at Oxford and the freedom it offered. The freedom to make choices and to be responsible for one's decisions. It was an exciting time to be a student in England, as one's friends came from different backgrounds and many countries. The foundation of the Radical Student Alliance. activism over Vietnam and Rhodesia did not really affect me; while the famous sit-in at the London School of Economics in February 1967 was soon a topic of heated conversation, it was too close to the Final Schools examination for us to do much else. Of course, Tariq Ali was around off and on, delivering fiery speeches, and I used to attend debates at the Oxford Union fairly regularly. But I cannot say that I was 'politically conscious' or terribly sensitive to the questions of inequality, poverty and injustice. A 21-year old from a sheltered home well over two decades ago was indeed an innocent compared to her successors of today!

In those days, whether one should come home or not was not much of an issue, at least not for me. The euphoria of the Nehruvian era lingered on and there was no reason to believe that India would not have a place for me, particularly with an Oxford degree safely in hand. By

the end Sixties, the brain drain was increasingly being talked about, it was a cause of growing concern in technical and medical institutions as the brightest started leaving for the West. But it did not concern me, nor ideas of my future. I got myself a job in a magazine where I wrote about this exodus as well as marvelled at the growing numbers of middle class working women, the need for family planning, violence in West Bengal politics and so on.

Soon, I was tried with journalism as I found it too superficial. The choices in those days were not many, nor was risk-taking looked upon too favourably. In 1968, then, I enrolled for an M.Litt. degree at the Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics. I spent considerable time training myself in research methods: an Oxford degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics with two special papers in sociology had not much on methodology and research techniques. My specialisation in the sociology of education oriented me towards a research topic which would need to reflect my interest. In those days, there was growing interest and a substantial body of literature on the sociology of professions, the school as an institution, socialisation processes, education as an agent of mobility and so on. I read Myrdal and Klein on working women and their dual roles (Klein, 1965, Myrdal and Klein, 1956), and In keeping with the current emphasis on role theory, decided to study women school teachers and their commitment to a profession and professionalism (Karlekar, 1970, 1975). Based on a study of 56 teachers in both government and private schools in Delhi I concluded that "more than 30 per cent of the sample had chosen teaching because they perceived it as a respectable occupation for educated women" (Ibid, 1975 :55). Thus, social respectability which meant working in the safe environment of the school, mostly with women colleagues, going to work by a school or chartered bus and limited working hours were important factors in determining choice of a profession.

I found that the economic motive was very important for over a third of the sample. While a quarter spent their entire income on household expenses, a majority of the rest said that the extra earnings helped improve the general standard of living of their families. As over 90 per cent were first generation women earners. I analysed in some detail the social change brought about by growing female employment. My thesis was an analysis of increasing employment among middle class women, contrasts between government and private employment and motivations for working outside the home. The emphasis was primarily on professionalism and then on women as a category of analysis. Thus, I concluded, women in private schools who did not need to work for a wage were more professionally committed and involved with their students. Most of those in government schools, on the other hand, did not think that being a teacher meant a special responsibility: in fact, as students often came from

underprivileged sections of society, middle class school teachers were keen on maintaining a social distance from them. A few also articulated that a lower caste background meant limited capacity to learn.

What I did not do was to question too closely or enter into heated discussions on any issue, be it determinants of student capabilities, parental roles, and relations with the school administration. Nevertheless, I observed interaction among students, parents and the administration and discussed these in the thesis. Nor did I question respondents on role-sharing at home-what is now known as the sexual division of labour-and whether they found the dual, if not triple, burden situation onerous. I remember myself as an eager young woman, anxious to succeed, and to please. But I also remember being aware of my privileged position: I had a good education, a secure and well-placed family background, and above all, the freedom to make choices and ask questions of myself and of my family. I was acutely conscious of these factors, which I'm sure also held me back from questioning those with few choices too intensely. On the other hand, I listened carefully to the teachers' observations and value judgements and noted them down almost verbatim. These were then included as long quotations in the text. The women's voices came through clearly here and in the case studies of eight teachers.

In 1969, I was at the stage of writing up my thesis when I got married and moved to Calcutta. I chose to marry a man from one of the leading intellectual and cultural families of Bengal, with a tradition of strong, highly educated women. Yet they were not Westernised, nor had they much experience of official Delhi where I had been born and brought up. Living in a nuclear unit helped in adjusting to each other and me to a new and at times intimidating environment. My ever affectionate aunts and cousins were a welcome buffer; they showed me the ropes in housekeeping, managing domestic servants and coping with that all pervasive mass of humanity and contradictions which is Calcutta. My husband's parents, and in particular my father-in-law, spoilt me and felt that I needed protecting.

This was not really true though at times I did long for a familiar environment, my parents and my friends. During my two years in Calcutta, I was introduced to several different social milieus. While writing my dissertation, I briefly taught at a women's college. It was far too reminiscent of the convent school I had hated so much and I left in a couple of months. Another reason of course was that I wanted to prepare a synopsis for my Ph.D. One day, in the teacher's common room when I told my colleagues that I was to leave, one of them burst out, "of course, you are lucky enough to have the option. Your salary is like a speck of dust on your palm-you can flick it off and more will come". I remember not knowing how to react. I also remember thinking of some of my school teacher respondents: maybe this woman shared a



similar background, a common grievance. I thought, with them? This was one of my early encounters, at first hand, with inequalities between women, and what it can do to human relationships.

When I enrolled for a Ph.D. at the Delhi School of Economics, I did not think of expanding my M. Litt. dissertation, a not uncommon option for many doctoral theses. In part my decision was governed by the fact that marriage took me to Calcutta and a different social and political world. Also clearly I was not sufficiently interested in women teachers or professionalism among women to pursue the theme in West Bengal. Work on my thesis took me into a completely different life situation, that of real-politik, violence, coping strategies, both fair and foul. I studied the Chhatra Parishad, a student association affiliated to the Congress Party, and its role in the party's resuscitation between 1970 and 1972. At that time, my husband, a journalist, who had been active in student politics had excellent contacts with the Congress. He introduced me to several Congressmen and Chhatra Parishad leaders.

Fieldwork for my Ph.D. took me to secret hideouts stacked with arms caches and rundown homes and offices. As I did the rounds of yet another small alleyway, I began thinking more and more about privilege and the lack of it, power the motivations for success, the pain and sorrow at failure ..... For many of my respondents, politics was an avenue for social as well as political mobility. They had little else to fall back upon. I empathized with them, but only upto a point. Again, as for my M. Litt. I included the respondents' voices in the text: I was acutely aware then as also now of the problems of representing the Other and felt that by using their words wherever possible I would in part take care of this problem. Of course this was years before postmodernism. deconstruction and the decentred self.

I remember wondering why the Chhatra Parishad did not have more women cadre or leaders. In fact, of my 81 respondents, only two were women. While one of these girls was included as a case study and hence Interviewed in detail, I was more concerned with her political socialisation than with her role as a woman in a male-dominated movement. I did not ask her any questions on whether she felt discriminated against in the Organisation or if she was trying to get other women friends to join the Chhatra Parishad. In other words, as with my M. Litt. dissertation, my interest was with social change and mobility. While the M. Litt. concentrated on women, the emphasis was on the growth of a profession. For my Ph.D., I was fascinated by the evolution of a movement, the creation of first generation leaders and their socialisation. Both theses then straddled current interests in agents of mobility, change and political development. The collective processes were of greater importance than individual dilemmas. By the time I had finished with field work and Calcutta, I was the mother of a son. I

soon faced the perennial maternal dilemma of leaving a young child to go to work. In those days, however, domestic help was fairly easily available and little children had started going to nursery school by the time they were two and three. A fellowship enabled me to stay home to write up my thesis: I remember thinking that now I could understand better the problems of my school teacher respondents.

In 1974, when I was nearing the end of my fellowship and my doctoral work, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Towards Equality. was published. Its many startling findings indicated the need for much greater investigation into the issues before women. Accordingly, the Indian Council of Social Science Research funded several studies, many of which were available in mimeo form by the end of the decade. A few years earlier, after my Ph.D., I had worked briefly in a private research institute on the mobility patterns of successful members of the Scheduled Castes. I was deeply moved by many stories of oppression. the struggle against caste hierarchies and the quest for education. Thus, when In 1975, Vina Mazumdar who was in charge of the ICSSR Unit on Women's Studies suggested that I should combine my growing interest in caste and gender-based inequalities with my basic commitment to the sociology of education, by studying a segment of urban Scheduled Caste women. I readily agreed. I applied for an ICSSR fellowship to work on the socioeconomic status of Balmiki women, a subcaste of the North Indian caste of Bhangis or sweepers and scavengers in a West Delhi tenement colony.

I was by then gradually 'getting into' women's studies: Towards Equality and Ester Boserup's Woman's Role in Economic Development provided plenty of material for reflection and anxiety. And of course, days in the field brought home dramatically the lived reality of the written word. I combined an open-ended interview schedule with in-depth case studies from a selected number of the total sample of 80. Not unexpectedly, many theoretical premises were tested and discarded. In particular, I found that in my fieldwork situation at least, it was a myth to assume that mechanisation and development would deprive women of employment : at the subsistence level. women would work at anything. At the end of fieldwork, I felt that I had enough material for a study of a section of working class women and to question certain preconceptions. My book, Poverty and Women's Work -A Study of Sweeper Women in Delhi based on an initial report, was published a few years later. What, however, did not come through in my published work was the dilemma I faced while in the field, and the consequent mental and conceptual adjustments I had to hastily perform. Problems arose primarily because of my construction of a different reality on the basis of certain presuppositions; though I had

pre-tested my interview schedule, obviously what I considered relevant and important were not always similarly viewed by my respondents.

I learnt much from those I interviewed; I knew soon that poverty led women to work for a wage anywhere and at any time. I also had to accept that often enough well-intentioned researchers myself knew little about urban congestion, of how families are bound to shacks and huts in what the middle class considers to be abject squalor. The proximity of jobs, kin and friendship networks are of vital importance, leading individuals and groups to resist re-location. I also did not know that women hesitated to use public latrines after dark: it would never have crossed my mind that these are the chosen venues for rape and molestation. I did not ask questions on domestic violence, alcoholism or family planning. In part, I was asked not to talk about the recent, much-hated sterilisation drive. But also, I did not know how to ask many questions. Above all, I did not know in 1975 that wife-beating and abuse is a part of daily family life in large segments of the population. I had to wait till 1990 to hear at first hand about this horror of women's lives.

When, at the end of fieldwork I told my respondents that they had been of considerable help to me, Shanta, who had become quite a friend said 'Bibiji (respected lady) aap to apni kitab likhenge, pur hamara kya hoga?' (Bibiji, you will write your book, but what will happen to us?). I had no honest answer to give her, just as I had not really been able to deal with the persistent question of many women, 'Bibiji homey issey kya milega?' (Bibiji, what will we get out of this?). My dilemma is of course not something unique: many a field worker is faced with similar situations where questions of one's role keeps cropping up. Such questions inevitably set up a chain of thought, a process of introspection: is one in fact exploiting one's respondents by taking up their time? Does not the process of questioning sooner or later, sow the seeds of doubt in the minds of one's informants? For instance, how did my constant harping on the issue of how much work men actually did within the home affect women who had internalized exploitation as their fate? Or for that matter, was I justified in asking probing questions on relationships with the natal home and how often women visited their families? Was I right in asking those at the subsistence level what consumer goods they owned?

When I sat down to write my report many images continued to fleet through my mind. I saw Bimla's anguish and Mayavati's cynicism as well as little Sharada's excitement as she prepared for a longed-for day in school. I was not always sure of what I should write about the lives of the women I had spent days with : while I knew that any act of telling is interpretive in nature, I was nonetheless anxious to be as 'true' to my respondents' reality as possible. Here again. I used the women's own words whenever possible. I also knew that when those one is

studying are physically and mentally subjugated by society and by men, the moral overtones of a field worker's intervention and probing have implications of self-analysis of consciousness-raising among a group who have little hope of escaping from the bondage of their lives. The resultant frustration and anger are in this case the direct responsibility of the field worker who becomes an agent of exploitation. I do not think that I have ever been able to answer my own doubts on this sensitive area of relationships across social classes. As already described, my intellectual apparatus, be it categories of analysts, vocabulary and questions which I regarded as important were, in many cases not relevant. Consequently, my pre-field work construction of what a typical oppressed Balmiki woman was like had to be constantly amended : I realised soon that the conversion of experience into expression is never easy.

### **Teaching and Research: 1977-1986**

Shortly after the completion of fieldwork, I became a Research Associate at the Delhi School of Economics: this was a time when there was an incipient - though growing-awareness of differences in social attitudes towards men and women. I can now look back quite dispassionately on the ten year between 1977 and 1986 when I taught Masters as well as research students courses in the sociology of education, supervised their term papers and dissertations; I have mixed feelings on how I negotiated my way as a relatively young women teachers at the Delhi School of Economics where I had been a student. It was not always easy to accept the views of one's former teachers; at the same time, no clear alternative views had crystallized. While the courses I taught had been developed by my M.Litt. thesis supervisor, I was free to innovate a little. My attempts nonetheless of convincing students (both boys and girls) that they could work meaningfully in women's studies were more cover, subterranean. By the end of the seventies I was talking about the problems faced by certain categories of students, in particular girls. A few students were desegregating educational data by sex while looking at enrollment and retention rates. Together with a colleague from the Department of History, I had introduced a course at the M.Phil level on Women and Society in India. This was in 1979, and it is perhaps as much a reflection of times as on the content of the paper that we had only two students, both whom were men !

When in 1984, I moved on a Jamia Millia Islmia's Faculty of Education as a Reader (Associate Professor), I introduced a topic in an optional course on the equality of educational opportunity debate with special reference to women, Muslims, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Muslim students were interested in finding out why their community remained educationally

deprived, and this included girls as well. At Jamia, there was practically no scope for the introduction of a separate course in women's studies. Today, the situation is very different and all three universities in the Capital-Delhi, Jamia Millia Islamia and Jawaharlala Nehru University- have papers in women's studies in various departments.

A couple of years later, I took leave of absence and joined the Centre for Women's Development Studies, I have not gone back to teaching again, a matter of occasional regret. At the same time, while I had enjoyed my ten years as a university teacher, I never really got involved with introducing gender as an issue at the departmental policy level. Nor is this as yet an easy task. Conversations with former colleagues indicate that they too have had to struggle to get their courses accepted by Academic and Department Councils; nonetheless, it is interesting that whereas in the past, courses on women, and later gender, would have been ruled out of hand, senior academics are prepared to listen to suggestions for change, I remember a time in 1981 when during syllabus revision meetings at the Delhi School of Economics the view that women in the family, or differential socialization patterns should be considered separately was dismissed peremptorily. On the other hand, at the post-graduate and independent research levels, there was and continues to be a far greater flexibility; supervisors are prepared to give their students a fairly long rope in choice of dissertation topics, approaches and methodologies.

During my later years of teaching, I often thought about new research areas. It became increasingly clear to me that contemporary studies of inequality and poverty were not enough to explain the deeper roots of gender divisions. My readings in the sociology of education's paper I taught for several years-made me feel that a delving into history may be useful. Among other things, It would help me overcome my own personal sense of inadequacy which had followed the study of sweeper women: there was something reassuring about looking at data where respondents were not going to be around to ask uncomfortable questions. A number of reasons, one of which was a distinct nagging feeling that I could not enter into another exploitative relationship, took me to a completely different area of study; as a middle class woman with an interest in her roots, I was curious to find out what role education has played in the lives of early pioneers, that is of nineteenth century women. I felt that archival research in this area would help me understand better the socio-historical genesis of unequal gender relations.

## **Appearing to get somewhere : 1986 onwards**

As I was turning these ideas over in my mind, I was encouraged by Vina Mazumdar, by then Director of CWDS, to think of a study which would look at women's self-perceptions as expressed in writing. Accordingly, I wrote up a proposal to work on nineteenth century Bengali women's narratives. When I joined the Centre in 1986, it was to work on my study as well as to help Vinadi coordinate the cross-national project-Women's Work and Family Strategies in South and South East Asia. "My individual study was one of 22 to be undertaken by scholars in different parts of the region. I remember looking forward to my new area of research-I was also relieved that I would not have to face moral issues which threatened my confidence as a social scientist and as a human being. At the same time, I was aware that I was now stepping into a new intellectual field; that of interpretation of texts, and theories of discourse and of reading. In order to cope better with my material, I also started reading in and around postmodern theory. My area of study clearly lent itself to something more than straight-forward descriptive analysis. I was not looking at the texts in isolation but rather as part-if not symbolic of a period of change when identities were being re-thought. Clearly then an analysis of this kind required a socio-historical contextualisation as well as attempts at understanding why women wrote and why they wrote what they did.

By the middle of the last century, Bengali upper caste, upper class women began writing essays, poetry, fiction, and about their own lives in a growing number of journals and magazines. All except a handful wrote in Bengali. A few of these were published as independent books. While women were familiar with a number of literary genres, for my study I mainly concentrated on autobiographical writings which I call personal narratives, and an important body of writings which can only be classified as exhortatory literature. Written as poems, stories and essays these compositions had the express purpose of reminding the readers of their basic responsibilities in a changing environment. Many also emphasised the role of education in promoting new ways of viewing the world. On the whole, by the later decades of the nineteenth century, morality as a value in public and private life acquired an exaggerated importance. Several views on the matter were increasingly voiced by the Bengali middle class. In part this can be explained by the social reform movement which drew its strength from a belief in some fundamental moral and religious values.

Almost 400 works by Bengali women were estimated to have been written between 1856 and 1910. These ranged from short poems to full-length novels and autobiographies. During the same period, to cater to a growing readership, twenty one periodicals which dealt primarily

with women's issues were being published. Interestingly, women were associated in various editorial capacities with these publications. More specifically, over the last century there is a record of at least fifty autobiographies and autobiographical sketches having been written by Benglai women. These personal narratives, a term which encompasses the more formal, full-length, structured autobiography, personal letters, newspaper and journal articles on one's life, as well as the musings of a daughter at the death of her father, made fascinating reading. As my aims was the re-creation of women's lives and not literary analysis. I used a somewhat non-purist definition of personal narratives. Accordingly, readings of the texts analysed are essentially a reflection of a personal point of view. This, in turn, influenced my choice of texts and my methodology. An acquaintance with the recorded history of the period, a reading of women's writings in Bengali as well as the relevant work of social anthropologists, historians, psychologists and other scholars working in the growing field of women's studies provided an overall context of changing colonial relations.

While writing my first draft, I was acutely aware of the fact that I was treading on difficult terrain; nonetheless, I persisted in a manner which I felt would best represent my understanding of the texts. My work with the Balmiki women had left me feeling that the acts of field work, interpretation, analysis and writing are basically exploitative in nature. Thought I did not go through the same degree of guilt while reading and analyzing the writing of nineteenth century women, I certainly experienced movement when I wondered whether I defend themselves. While contemporary trends which state that a work lives through its reading on the individual. Are we then heading towards multiple readings, understandings ? If we are, how do we tackle an apprehensive and powerful awareness of oneself as being center stage? At some point, I came to terms with this dilemma, and decided to go ahead and write. That Voice from Within emerged at the end of two very different drafts is proof enough of the fact that it has not been easy.

Like many other field workers, I am still bewildered by the entire process of attempting to understand and give expression to other realities. In the process of looking for a context where I feel more comfortable with myself and the subject of my research, I have moved from active engagement with respondents to a cocooned existence amidst moth-eaten texts, recreating the lives of individuals long dead. I have moved from interviews and participant observation to the less emotionally wearying analysis of texts and policy documents. If this essay has read more as an exegesis on field work methods, it is because this very process has been essential for my search for space. I knew many years ago that I enjoyed field work; what I did not know - or did not know well enough - was that field work involves a dialogical process,

a re-negotiation of categories. As I found, it was not easy to adjust to different and at times, conflicting realities. But it would be less than honest if I did not add that the creation of this space has had implications of my personal life as well: increasingly, commitment to a more equitable society based on questioning rather than merely accepting existing assumptions has led me to re-think my role as wife, mother, daughter and as friend. It has given me the self-assurance to reach out to a range of Individuals and to cope with complex situations. A decade ago, I would have shied away from these, afraid of my vulnerability. I am still vulnerable-after all, who Isn't? Yet, I feel stronger within myself to face what I would earlier have shunned, if not looked away from defensively. I feel that much of this feeling is an outcome of intellectual conviction in a particular ideological position : for me personal beliefs have much to do with a process of reasoning, of attempting to work out an understanding of gender inequality in logical, systematic steps. Since 1975, the Indian women's movement has gone a long way in identifying problems, agitating for solutions and getting them implemented (Gandhi and Shah, 1992, Sharma, 1989). Coincidentally, these were also the years when I withdrew from fieldwork into the reassuring portals of libraries and the homes of the nineteenth century elite. Yet, by 1990, I felt a restlessness to go back to the field once more. In part, this restlessness was an anthropologist's craving to be with real people. But only in part.

If the last fifteen years had not been so rich in methodological and conceptual debates, I'm not sure that I would have felt confident to do so. My choice of research methods had over all these twenty five years, been pointing me in a definite, unbroken direction. While the naivete of a 23 year old later gave way to a more systematic mode of enquiry, my emphasis has consistently remained on hearing many voices. I have not been alone in my dilemma, nor in my search for an appropriate methodology. When one's private anxieties find a reflection in public discourse, clearly there is scope for articulating and moving back to the field again. A novice's apprehensions at encountering an uncharted terrain which led me to seek legitimacy in the words of respondents are today viewed as vital in the construction of new realities. No matter what adjective one may use thinking, interpreting, representing or writing about another's life is a tricky business. It is useful and reassuring then to share with others that "the actual expertise and language of women is the central agenda for feminist social science and scholarship" (Du Bois, 1983:108). For, feminist researchers, have, over the last decade, been increasingly emphasising the need to hear the voices of women (Duelli Klein, 1983; Du Bois, 1983, Karlekar, 1991; Oakley, 1981 Reinharz, 1983: Roberts, 1981: Stacey, 1988: Stanley and Wise. 1983a, 1983b).



By the end of 1989, I was ready to go back to the field. My present project on violence against women has so far looked at how the police and counselling centres deal with the voices of women asking for justice. In so doing, they are defining and redefining themselves and their psycho-physical boundaries. For it is clear that aggression and violence, physical or otherwise, is an all pervasive phenomenon in heterosexual relationships. It is there in the process which persuades a young woman to be a respectable school teacher rather than a surgeon as well as in the tension-ridden inter-caste relationships in villages and slums. Its ubiquity makes it an important area for research and debate as it underpins social and personal constructions of femininity and masculinity. Thus, as I continue with my present project, I see a continuity with my earlier work.

My confidence also grew in large part because of the knowledge of the growing ease with which women are willing to share, to speak and to create their lives again. Before I ventured back to the field I had many encounters of mutual sharing and trust which assured me that a context is not impossible to create and even re-create anew. For the field worker has to tell the story of many lives one of which is surely her own. And when those voices she wishes to hear speak to her with a poignancy and an almost crystal-clear honesty, she works hard to suppress too many questions on her role and the problems of interpretation, understanding and so on. Fifteen years ago I felt threatened, pained, inadequate, by that honesty and the reaching out for answers. Today I find it easier to cope with, not only within myself but also because the scope of child care, employment, domestic conflict resolution mechanisms and so on have increased and been legitimised. I can at least try and work towards some solutions in individual cases to the age-old problem of wife abuse and battered women : with the Balmikis I did not even have the courage to ask the question, not only because I felt that it would be an invasion of privacy, but also because I did not know how to deal with it.

It is an exciting time to be a social anthropologist with a commitment to women's studies. I have found it particularly challenging to map the trajectories of feminist theory and anthropology with those of postmodernism. Feminists claim the right to contribute to knowledge creation often by 'deposing' reigning canons. So do post modernists. But for the former-as for anthropologists the context is of vital importance. Anthropologists in the field are talking to and writing about human beings in a variety of situations. Feminist theorists base many of their sensibilities and observations on the lives of other women : women in poverty, in struggle, in situations of oppression and exploitation and in joy and victory. It is in these contexts where the stories lie and give strength to those who reach out. The quest for new realities is firmly rooted in women's experiences, and their knowledge of these experiences. It is

also a challenging time to be a mother of a 21 year old son searching for himself and a daughter of 17 who is caught in several dilemmas. Whether one likes it or not, compromises with one's commitments are battered down with the relentless "why can't I?" or "how shall I?", and yet, as one enters into another endless round of arguments, one still feels that it's worth it. I think back of a youth where one listened silently and reflected within oneself but did not question too much.

I grew-as we all do--at varying paces and due to different influences. I was a Beauvoffian dutiful daughter but I don't think that either I or my sister had the same kind of symbiotic relationship with my parents as I have with my children. It is a relationship which asks for much as well as nurtures. And I feel sure that my responses have much to do with an involvement with the women's movement and women's studies. It has taught me to accept individual differences as well as hold out for ultimate benefits for the collectivity. My children may baulk at my occasional flights of rhetoric, but ultimately they know that there is space for other ways of looking at the world. Early exposure to a range of our friends, professional colleagues, Rassundari Debi, Jane Austen and Ismat Chughtai has taught them that learning is not only what the texts and words tell them : it is also the capacity to look for what lies beyond.

### III

Today, women's studies is on the threshold of new directions, exciting challenges and a few long battles. Debates on validity, legitimacy and differing voices are increasingly common place. There is no one woman's movement but several intermeshing issues, aspirations and demands which spread across geographic boundaries. The points of similarity are many but so are the differences. This is true within a country as well as cross-nationally. The notion of sisterhood is often enough a symbolic bonding, melding together a range of women from disparate life situations at the level of consciousness, if not reality. For, material, social and ethnic differences cannot be wished away, nor can gender be the great equaliser. And yet, with each passing day, there seems more and more to share.

As I journey along, I am aware of the information and vocabulary revolutions which are a growing part of the women's movement. Violence, new reproductive technologies, environmental protection, wasteland development, grassroots empowerment, networking-increasingly compete for space with the concepts I learnt when I was initiated into women's studies. The excavatory phase of looking for hidden voices and invisible faces is now being overtaken by the quest for a sharing of power and authority with the hitherto powerless and

unknown. Academia and activism join hands, albeit cautiously at symposia and conferences. And protagonists argue their positions doggedly. The search for voices continues as does the clamour around me. The women's movement has given an authority to those who had earlier only been expected to listen and obey. The self confident new generation has inherited a rich legacy of political, legal and social reform. And as more voices join in, and more demands are mooted, I feel the need to stand back and take stock. For the social anthropologist remembers the need for self analysis and introspection even as new issues and agendas tempt as well as overwhelm me.

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