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A Reflection on the Scope of Feminist Pedagogy in Indian Tertiary Education

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A REFLECTION ON THE SCOPE OF FEMINIST PEDAGOGY IN INDIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION

Indian education policy is committed to the constitutional provisions ensuring gender justice through different Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy. However, Indian higher educational institutions (HEI) have hitherto met with mediocre success in the gender-neutral socialization process (National Education Policy [NEP], 2020). Indian learners in different undergraduate or postgraduate courses come from a patrilocal psychosocial background. They endorse a patriarchal socio-economic power structure. They uphold patrilinear socio-legal upbringing. Inept sex education received in primary, secondary, and intermediate level fails to recognize the nuances of gender segregation and gender struggle. For example, a tribal student experiences differential empowerment challenges and social puritanism than a non-tribal student. A Dalit[1] student is prone to face severe discrimination. The social positioning of a Savarna[2] woman differs from that of a Savarna man. "Effeminate" men and queer students are the most marginalised who face the ugliest peer bullying and social and administrative aggression. Given that Indian HEIs are diverse and different from other complex classrooms of the world, the educators and students are positionally all unique and different (NEP, 2020). The purpose of this work is to review the impact of power differentials, class dynamics, and patriarchal values on students.

Indian HEIs boost a positive learning environment with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Skinner's Operant Conditioning Theory, and Gestalt Theory. However, the existing pedagogy does not offer the least restrictive environment possible, deterring successful self-actualisation. Learners are segregated into sexist prejudices and gender socialisation, in terms of their class, caste, gender, religion, sexuality, and region. Instead of creating a gender-neutral, inclusive academic environment, it limits the desired sense of belonging among female and transgender students. Social conditioning makes the entire group unlearn undesired and unsocial behaviour and somewhat learn deserved changes in their behaviour through occasional reinforcements. The zeal of problem solving and perception of gender inconsistencies, gender gaps, or gendered disturbances encourages very few students to discover the variables that make up the gender binary. The essential stimuli in this creative pursuit and experiential learning process are lost without convincing psychosocial direction.

One of the most appreciated participatory learning techniques in Indian premier HEIs is the Socratic Method, accentuating the gender binary. Another potential

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[1] Dalit is a member of the lowest caste in South Asia, considered as the depressed class of people in India who are subjected to untouchability and social exclusion.
[2] Savarna belongs to one of the four main castes i.e., Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra of the Hindu Varna system of social classes, considered to be the forward class of people.

pedagogical strategy remains the "peer teaching" technique. It successfully deals with conflicts, arising out of class, caste, religion, region, community, and gender-specific indexes present in the social hinterland that the learners inhabit, and resolves to achieve a gender-just and less violent one. Thence, if students encounter situations with subjective gender experiences of conflict involving the self, family, society, or the contemporary world, they will call for a revised moral assessment and actions. However, Feminist Pedagogy is the avant-garde pedagogical strategy. It can juxtapose a dialogue between the dominant and the subservient ranks, articulating the domination quotient of class, caste, religion, region, community, and gender-specific manifestations. It can also perform the complex task of analysing those micro and macro psychosocial and socio-cultural structures, religious position of the minorities, gauge the perception of heterosexuality from the position of homosexuals, caste from the position of a Dalit, and address the social positioning of gender paradigm and sexual division of labour from a normative position (Rege, 1995).

As a considerable number of Indian HEI learners belong to diverse social, economic, cultural and gender groups, they bring with them a variety of cultural practices, knowledge systems, ways of seeing, as an understanding of manifold identity becomes critical for the educator. Feminist Pedagogy can liberate learners and educators from this gendered paradigm, garnering a positive change in Indian society. Hitherto, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, as enunciated by Paolo Freire, deems fit to offer feminist pedagogical praxis for the Indian HEI scenario.

The perceived hierarchy within any Indian HEI classroom i.e., the teacher is more knowledgeable than the students and therefore possess the authority, represents Freire's (2005) "Banking Model"; the teacher "deposits" facts into the minds of the students, who are to memorize and recall them (p. 71). It represents and recreates the oppressive social structure that "gendered subaltern" lives in, where the Savarna cisgender "man" is perceived to be superior to the rest and thus determine what is good or correct. Such pedagogy issues communique but does not ensure "inquiry" of learning. Instead, the "Problem-Posing Model" offered by Freire (2005) restores a more equal relationship between the educator and the students, as everyone fills the role of the teacher and the student simultaneously (p. 77). These "teacher-students" and "student-teachers" decide subject topics that are important to talk about, together. Thereafter, the educator becomes an instructional facilitator who presents the topics as "problems" to the whole class, which they are then required to solve together. Therefore, as it does not add any "correctness" prejudice of authoritative "ranking," it is democratic, as it assumes everyone's voice has equal value to contribute intellectually to the "knowledge."

The use of Boal's (1998) "Modelling Sequence" (pp. 127-129) and "Image Technique" (pp. 164-187) in this regard would call for critical attention to gender-sensitive simulation and "dynamisation." E.g., the students are to be assessed on,

"How is the sexuality and reproductive potential of women controlled and regulated?" And will be arranged into two role-play groups: the sculptor and the statue. The sculptor will make a statue depicting gender oppression and discrimination in regards to regulation of women's sexuality and control over female reproductive potential. The facilitator will ask the students to define the kind of oppression the statue represents and ask them to add dialogue for the statue. The educator will ask to add more character and try to investigate together, the cause of such discrimination, through sequences. A poster-making competition and presentation along with the "What-Why-How" rubric can be a successful practical assessment option to articulate gender dynamics in Indian society.

How can the "Modelling Sequence" and "Image Technique" strategies synced in the "Problem-Posing Model," originally described and used in theatre, be relevant, connected, and more coherent to dissect gender binary in Indian HEI classrooms? Students are no more the passive audience. The active student participation would alter the monologue into a dialogue. The use of such a teaching technique for adult learners in HEIs seems apt, as it has the potential to transform the classroom academic discourses into a method of gender liberation, deterring gender-polarisation from becoming a tool of oppression and patriarchal domination. Identification and incorporation of real-life situations and experiences reflecting the gender paradigm, including discussion, role play, skit, narration, presentation, improvisation, hot-seat etc., appreciate gender-inclusive participation and inculcate empathy among the adult learners of higher education (Rege, 1995).

Thus, Indian tertiary education can approach a curriculum design in line with the international benchmark to the development of academic critical thinking and intellectual open-mindedness (UN Women Training Centre, 2018). Incorporating feminist pedagogy in the Indian HEI curriculum can treat knowledge as neutral and delegitimize certain patriarchal visions and chauvinistic claims of society.

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