

October 2023

We Deliver: The Condition of the Woman Academic in India Today

Ananya Dutta Gupta
Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dutta Gupta, Ananya (2023) "We Deliver: The Condition of the Woman Academic in India Today," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 25: Iss. 7, Article 12.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss7/12>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

We Deliver: The Condition of the Woman Academic in India Today

By Ananya Dutta Gupta¹

Abstract

This auto-ethnographic essay draws upon Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* to discuss the condition of Indian women in the Humanities in academia today. While acknowledging the encouragingly gender-inclusive projections in India's National Education Policy vision statement from 2020, I argue for more probing engagement with the concrete reality of being a woman teacher and researcher in the increasingly competitive and corporatized milieu of higher education. My methodology has been a close reading of the NEP's vision statement to analyze recurrences of terms and concepts as pointers to its discursive field. I argue that this policy statement implicitly envisions an empowered new-age Indian woman teacher, notionally mother to all her pupils, aiding their awakening intuitively from the very heart of her experiences, skills, and memories. Against this somewhat idealized feminine ecology of the NEP in principle and spirit, I juxtapose the actual everyday choices and struggles of women in academic positions. Does the decolonization of education in spirit also impart actual transformative agency to women academics? Will women be listened to? Not one essential woman, but heterogeneous women—women across different strata, identities, professional spaces, and ideologies? Above all, my essay probes the challenges and dividends of transitioning to a more home-grown teaching and research methodology derived from current Western academic models. For instance, what forms and lines of interdisciplinarity could best serve the interest of quality control in research and teaching? In the third and last section, I argue that women are equal contributors in the discourse of academics in the future. We are committed stakeholders that can help enhance collective performance and efficiency in ways that are commensurate and compatible with our particular needs, contexts, restraints, aptitudes, and encumbrances. I conclude my essay by urging colleagues in academia, women and men, to recognize that we can truly deliver on this challenge only in a spirit of intellectual, ethical, and interpersonal collaboration and collegiality.

Keywords: Higher education, Women workers, India, Collegiality, Gender, Michel Foucault, Auto-ethnography, National Education Policy

Introduction

In this informally longitudinal study, I shall be mining my own personal two-decades-long journey as teacher of literature and culture for share-worthy insights about the condition of women in the Humanities in academia. My methodology is auto-ethnographic, which is to say I shall be my own text and reader. Such self-reflexivity, as demonstrated in Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), is not only useful as a research mode for women but also as means for women to reclaim research for themselves. It could enable women researchers to redefine discursive parameters and accommodate new narratives and possibilities beyond available

¹ Ananya Dutta Gupta is an Associate Professor of English at the Department of English, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India. She was awarded her Ph.D. in 2014 by Jadavpur University in Kolkata for her dissertation on Renaissance English representations of the city under siege. Alongside teaching, Ananya Dutta Gupta has published book reviews and translations of essays, poetry, and short stories. Her most recent publications include a bilingual book of anecdotes about her son's growing years, titled *Abhi Buli: The Diary of a Quipster Boy* (Kolkata: Parchment, 2021), and a debut collection of eighty poems on birds, *For Tomorrow the Birds Might Still Sing* (Santiniketan: Birutjatio, 2021).

theoretical paradigms. Our touchstone will be our empirical faithfulness to our subjective experience and our methodology, which is inevitably interdisciplinary. To reiterate a truism, since we are all simultaneously economic, social, political, legal, cultural, and historical subjects, we are subject to the interplay of wisdoms across these disciplines, without necessarily seeking to totalize or homogenize them.

Deconstructing the Gendered Keywords in the NEP Policy Document

Notionally, the National Education Policy 2020 vision statement, which I am using as a framing text here to discuss the issues and challenges around women in academia, makes just such empowering, inclusive projections for women and other demographic categories. The term gender is invoked thirteen times in the policy statement, besides assertions such as the following:

The aim must be for India to have an education system that ensures equitable access to the highest-quality education for all learners regardless of social and economic background....The National Education Policy lays particular emphasis on the development of the creative potential of each individual, in all its richness and complexity. (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 3)

Crises and conflict situations, be they personal or external, suddenly and dramatically compel us to become aware of ourselves as individual, situated human subjects. The pandemic has been the most powerful recent catalyst for that process of self-recognition. In one sweep, it has brought us face to face with what we are—primarily as mortal biological entities, contaminable by and contagious to other bodies, known and unknown, but also as name and gender, institutional affiliate and bank account holder, performing certain functions and roles vis-à-vis others in the family, at work, in our communities, and in the state that has emerged as the ultimate entity authorizing all these putatively constituent identity formations. This brings me to the *Aadhaar* (a 12-digit identification number issued to each person by the government of India) and its interesting intertextuality with the NEP document. The cultural anthropological tropes and markers that they appear to share emerge from and refer back to the politics of *domus*, or home, in all its gendered ramifications (Leach 257-264).

I think the *Aadhaar* is an astute choice of name. It is the *aadhaar*, the repository of all our different identities, professional, familial, legal, and financial. *Aadhaar* (meaning vessel) is a very Jungian equivalent of the feminine as a space, within the female body and without. In Indian classical, folk, and popular music and cinema, the ubiquitous earthen pot and pitcher are essential implements of the traditional rural Indian kitchen, and the chore of fetching water from nearby wells and ponds has long been an Indian woman's job.

The National Education Policy uses the trope of a wheel's "hub and spoke" (MHRD 44) to explain the proposed collaborative model for resource-sharing between multidisciplinary universities and local autonomous or semi-autonomous colleges. While the *Aadhaar* is projected as a stable and stabilizing hub where multiple identities converge, the wheel trope in the NEP's text and diction suggests an encouragement of forward propulsion through rotation. As in a wheel in motion, then, all parts touch the ground in a uniform cycle of changing positions, while being propelled forward by some leading energy. Alternatively, it is the rotating potter's wheel gathering in and churning out beautiful round *aadhaars*. The shared play on sphericity, be it through static nurturing or energizing locomotive growth, is hard to miss.

The NEP also speaks of a “well-rounded” (3, 12, 33, 34, 36, 47) integration of the arts and the sciences, of the vocational and the scholastic, the classical and the contemporary, the ancient and the futuristic, the elite and the ethnic, the cosmopolitan and the indigenous, the national and the regional, the central and the provincial, and the integral and the diverse (5). In doing so, this vision statement posits a political philosophy of ideal Indian education that is inclusive, anti-colonial, and re-integrational (4), as opposed to the putatively exclusionary and substitutive ethos of colonial education. It articulates a desire to round off the jagged edges, to reshuffle what Foucault describes as the “various sedimentary strata” (Foucault 3) of two hundred years of colonial practices followed by seventy-five years of independence in such a way that the layers underneath are churned up through a process of convection and osmosis.

My own choice of analogy here is noteworthy. Convection and osmosis are physical processes through which primarily liquid matter is transformed or transferred. Interestingly, fluidity is a key element in the NEP and is repeatedly factored into the projected “light but tight” model (MHRD 5, 31, 47, 59). That is to say, emphasis is laid on leniency (“less content,” “enjoyable,” and “engaging”) (3), “flexibility” (3, 6, 34), and porosity between institutions, disciplines, streams, and degree qualifications. In fact, terms like multi-, inter-, and cross-disciplinary abound in the text of NEP 2020 (3, 4, 5, 11, 22, 23, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 40, 43, 44, 45, 53, 56, and 57) while “holistic” turns up thirty-three times.

Consonant with this concept of fluidity as opposed to rigid solidity, the text privileges terms like “knowledge landscapes” (3), “knowledge traditions” (4), “knowledge systems” (5, 14, 57), “knowledge society and economy” (30, 44, 54), “knowledge creation” (30, 44, 45), “learned societies” (46), alongside “research communities” (31), “educational culture” (25), “culture of empowerment and autonomy” (33), “strong culture of research” (45), “culture of excellence and innovation” (46), “one coherent ecosystem of higher education,” and “robust ecosystem of research” (3, 30, 33, 44, and 48).

The text of NEP is a cautious commemoration of a return to the home-grown, the *desi*. It promotes education that is easily converted into energy. It is meant to spare us the burdens of Western punditry, while keeping us prepared for the real and active challenge of protecting our homes and our common habitat, Mother Earth, from the staggered ill effects of the Anthropocene (3). The National Education Policy is professedly a statement of arrival on the part of a confident India no longer willing to defer to the West’s hand-me-downs when it comes to charting its own future in education and nation-building. “Cultural preservation” is prioritized (3):

These elements must, of course, be incorporated in an Indian manner and style, taking into account the local and global needs of the country, and with a respect for and deference to its rich diversity and culture. An instilling of knowledge of all of India and its varied social, cultural, and technological needs, its inimitable artistic, language, and knowledge traditions, and its strong ethics in India’s young people is considered critical for purposes of national pride, self-confidence, self-knowledge, cooperation, and integration—and thus, consequently, its continued progress and ascent. (MHRD 4)

I would like to argue that this policy statement implicitly envisions an empowered new-age Indian woman teacher, notionally mother to all her pupils, aiding their awakening intuitively from the very heart of her experiences, skills, and memories conveyed across generations. Not coincidentally, the architectural unit of the home invoked in the context of school education is the *anganwadi* (MHRD 6-7) network, a rural support center for women and young children. *Angan* or

“courtyard” is an integral part of a traditional Indian house, and one where women and children would be visible socializing, performing chores, and in the case of the latter, playing. Notably, again, the word “nurture” occurs several times (MHRD 4, 14, 17, and 46). It is a re-domestication of education, a welcome home gesture to the prodigal sons, albeit under the watchful paternalist presence of quite a few national-level umbrella monitoring authorities.

In sync with this implicit paternalism, the emphasis in this grand narrative of change is laid on “spirit” and “intent” (59), as different from the “critical matter” (59) of implementation. The very conceptualization of this prophet-like ancestral voice, this moving force, *primum mobile*—is magisterial, messianic, and implicitly male. This totalizing vision is in itself an epistemological and methodological challenge. In the words of Michel Foucault,

The project of a total history is one that seeks to reconstitute the overall form of a civilization, the principle—material or spiritual—of a society, the significance common to all the phenomena of a period, the law that accounts for their cohesion—what is called metaphorically the ‘face’ of a period. (Foucault 9)

There are the notions of development and evolution: they make it possible to a succession of dispersed events, to link them to one and the same organizing principle, to subject them to the exemplary power of life (with its adaptations, its capacity for innovation, the incessant correlation of its different elements, its systems of assimilation and exchange), to discover, already at work in each beginning, a principle of coherence and the outline of a future unity, to master time through a perpetually reversible relation between an origin and a term that are never given, but are always at work. There is the notion of ‘spirit’, which enables us to establish between the simultaneous or successive phenomena of a given period a community of meanings, symbolic links, an interplay of resemblance and reflexion, or which allows the sovereignty of collective consciousness to emerge as the principle of unity and explanation. (Foucault 21-22)

A Reality Check on Present-Day Women Academics: Struggles within and without

So far, this essay has been an attempt to identify the gendered underpinnings of the NEP’s conceptual rubric. Now I come to my core concern in this essay: its implications for the lives of women in academia. For me, the fundamental questions are the following: Does the feminization and domestication of education in spirit automatically impart actual transformative agency to women academics? Will women be listened to? Not one essential woman, but heterogeneous women—women across different strata, identities, professional spaces, and ideologies? The NEP is replete with the term equitability (MHRD 2, 3, 5, 10, 17, 23, 24, 29, 32, 33, 38, 39, and 58). “Equity” (5), equitability, equal opportunity, and fairness are welcome ideals, in view of Indian women’s employment statistics, as cited by Shrayana Bhattacharya in her unconventionally brilliant study of women’s lives in India (Bhattacharya 80-81, 89).

It would be useful to note that maternity leave and childcare leave apart, the patterns for assessing performance and progression under Internal Quality Assessment stipulations are uniform for men and women academics. It is possible to argue that if entry into the academic space is itself a marker of privilege, then we women in academics might wish to see ourselves as privileged enough to forgo further privileges. This would translate into a rejection of equivalences and concessions from standardized parameters. Be that as it may, my concern here is not with the politics of claiming or renouncing privileges. I would rather that we women academics are

perceived as equal contributors in the discourse of academics in the future, as committed stakeholders that can help enhance collective performance and efficiency in ways that are commensurate and compatible with our particular needs, contexts, restraints, aptitudes, and encumbrances.

Will women's actual habits of work and their perceptual principles be acknowledged? Will the positive projections of inter-gender empathy, understanding, and division of labor as shown in the Ariel campaign hash-tagged "share the load"² be disseminated and replicated in the academic field? In this context, I must put on record the exemplary cooperation I have had from my men and women colleagues at my home department throughout my years of service. Men colleagues often shoulder the lion's share of the administrative grind leaving me at substantial leisure to teach classes and write. One only hopes that the larger picture is quite as positive, but one cannot be certain.

The work-from-home arrangement made necessary by the pandemic increased my capacity to work both immersively and expansively. I was able to distribute my lecture hours across days in a way that lessened my exhaustion while improving the quality of my engagement. On normal working days before 2020, I would be gasping for breath as I drifted from one classroom to another, one historical period to another, one text to another. I shall not generalize or essentialize this working style. I shall not assume that this circadian work culture in sync with nature's own timekeeping will be deemed suitable by all women colleagues. Some of us might be comfortable with more clock-bound structuring.

Will the "light but tight" model of pedagogy postulated by the NEP allow women to give their best teaching, research, and administrative performance in experientially evolved ways that are both ethical and efficient? Shall we be granted an optimal degree of autonomy to achieve work-life balance?

The dialectics of managing gender-specific needs and priorities while maintaining legitimate pan-institutional homogeneity is a daunting one. The negotiation of visible presence as demonstrative of work ethic via biometric imprinting is no doubt necessary for institutions to put checks and balances in place. No doubt women academics shall conform. Conforming, however, will entail mentally and physically exacting schemas of prioritization. The generous provision for Child Care and Maternity Leaves under the Seventh Pay Commission notwithstanding, the increasingly target- and product-oriented corporatization of academic work today makes academic spaces far less women-friendly than it was twenty or even ten years ago.

A YouTube video recently posted by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology about wildlife biologist Purnima Devi Burman throws light on her extraordinary journey from being a cloistered doctoral scholar to a bird activist ("Hargila"). Purnima Devi adopts creative strategies to rally local village women together into a Hargila Army, dedicated to conserving the endangered species of adjutant storks, also known as *hargilas*. The take-home lesson from her campaign is her pragmatism in coming down from the pedestals of academic language. The methodology she devises is not a top-down logocentric model based on textbook precepts and prescriptions, but rather an interestingly affective one, and fundamentally lateral, just as the NEP would perhaps encourage—except that such problem-solving can be subversive of rather than subservient to ideological preconceptions. In this context, let me place before my readers a somewhat personal, empirically acquired definition of lateral thinking. Loosely based on Foucault's theory of dispersion and general history, it sounds like inductive reasoning and cumulative, empirical,

² This campaign was conceptualized by BBDO India in 2015. The videos explored the consequences of unequal distribution of chores in the household and urged men to "share the load" with women.

micro-level, engagement with sense data, except that the politics of structuring is non-conformist and flexible. Purnima Devi slowly enlists the women's trust through multiple points of entry, involving sharing food and craft practices besides everyday conversation; she then redirects the confidence thus gradually reposed in her towards the collective task of saving the *hargilas*. It is an interesting political method, entailing an astute use of what Foucault calls "dispersion" (Foucault 10, 12, 21, 37). She divides her energies in order to gather in the energies and synergies of the women together towards herself and then reorients them towards another even more disadvantaged collective—the *hargilas*.

We cannot all quit our doctoral studies like Purnima Devi Burman. Rather, her example inspires us to speculate whether women's research could have a naturally ethnographic and a practical "problem solving" (MHRD 4, 6, 14, 34) slant aided by positive use of digital technology. The latter is serviceable in negotiating access and physical mobility in respect of fieldwork and resource acquisition. In literature studies, particularly, this has traditionally entailed travel to libraries and archives. Today certain clusters of such resources are digitally available. Ethnographic "fieldwork" will certainly entail a shift in our understanding of the nature of our resources. Such resources will be in one sense closer to home, but such resource acquisition will entail physical movements outside of the secure confines of institutional libraries to places such as people's homes in remote rural locations or non-academic workplaces such as newspaper offices or factories or fringe neighborhoods.

The choices can be broadly defined as follows. We can research the here and the now, treading carefully through the cloud of dust, risking politically polarized, hegemonic, or anti-hegemonic reading of our work. Or we can seek refuge in geo-historically removed subject matter. In the latter scenario, our research addresses the past through the lenses of our present, projecting onto that discourse what Foucault calls "desires" that we can neither disown nor express in contexts closer to home:

[D]iscourse may in fact be the place for a phantasmatic representation, an element of symbolization, a form of the forbidden, an instrument of derived satisfaction (this possibility of being in relation with desire is not simply the fact of the poetic, fictional, or imaginary practice of discourse: the discourses on wealth, on language (*langage*), on nature, on madness, on life and death, and many others, perhaps, that are much more abstract, may occupy very specific positions in relation to desire). (Foucault 68)

So, we might be researching war in sixteenth century English and European writings, but does that not at some points afford useful insights into the ongoing siege of Mariupol in Ukraine? A mindfully maintained symbiosis between one's moment in history from one's own location in geography and one's area of specialized research is the mainstay of sustainable academics today.

While a local reorientation is notionally welcome, even in literature and culture studies, the possibilities of a clash of methodologies need to be countenanced. Research, as some of us have been taught to practice from a Western academic perspective, is primarily an exercise in self-discipline, in intellectual curatorship, argumentative coherence, and in skilled textual resource management. It is expected to be a practice that licenses time-bounded withdrawal and controlled communication with select participants—one's supervisor, peer researchers in the field, and primary and secondary authors through the screen of their books and writings. All this is meant to be accomplished under the protective and indulgent aegis of the academic institution, indulgent in terms of granting the exclusivity and isolation demanded of such an exercise.

In principle, such isolation is the very opposite of the kind of immediacy of engagement and intervention demanded by the most pressing issues around us today. Our investment in our respective doctoral projects, however, need not inevitably be placed in a relationship of perpetual tension with the demands of making a difference to our immediate circles of life. That is where calibration of our energies and the competing demands of the spaces we inhabit and our moment in human and planetary time becomes necessary. Sustaining a long-term balancing act on the seesaw of academics versus life outside is a story of sustainable development too, and one that might involve the fulcrum of intelligent but honest choice of one's area of research and inquiry.

For women academics, I would argue, this is a double challenge. Over the past twenty years, we have had to conform to a certain code of research articulation that is fundamentally Western, linear, and exclusionary in approach. Women who do research while doing so much else (raising a family and managing their households) struggle to fit into that. Naturally, our concrete visible quantifiable research output suffers. We have spent years learning the methodology of niche academic productivity and the desired trajectory for academic career progression. The latter is supposed to look like this: research papers at the Bachelors' and Masters' levels, identification and marshaling of research interests early on, acquisition of a research position alongside teaching responsibilities, pursuit of an MPhil and afterwards Ph.D. in that area of study, publishing papers and monographs via post-doctoral research positions, and then graduating to middle-career teaching cum research positions. What about the fact that this linear progression is itself in a rather taut and fraught competition with the detours or breathers afforded by the spawning of miscellaneous teaching interests?

As a woman who struggles to balance her teaching and research, I often find myself publishing shorter, intensive studies on contemporary concerns with a degree of ad hoc haste, because the long timeline required for many scholarly publications sometimes seems counterproductive and elitist to me. It discourages engagement on topical issues with the general reader. What I find myself impelled to maintain, therefore, is a daunting balancing act—teaching some of my core specialties, measured trespasses into other areas driven by newly aroused or long-standing interest, researching miscellaneous short-term projects, and very slowly taking on long-term core research projects. The result is rich but mixed. Will the NEP's thrust towards the here and the now give greater legitimacy to my research diversity and my intermittent investment in the ethnography of the everyday and the contemporary?

The NEP does seem to endorse a de-cluttered, streamlined career progression based on research opportunities and teaching incentives. The question is, will that be compatible with its other projections? Fluidity of student intake “with multiple entry and exit points” (MHRD 34) and corresponding fluidity of the curriculum (34), such as is envisioned in the same NEP, will inevitably lead us towards a more lateral distribution of our critical energies. While this can certainly re-energize interdisciplinarity in our research pursuits, it might also lead to disinvestment in sustained work. Interdisciplinarity ought to entail the collaboration of specialists from across disciplines and discourses. Such collaboration is fruitful and rewarding for research, researchers, and society at large.

However, as even the process of writing a single academic paper for submission to any reputed journal will testify, interdisciplinarity does not translate automatically into fluidity of approach any more than it entails glib, wholesale application of theories from the social sciences to the study of literary, artistic, and cultural texts. In fact, interdisciplinarity surfaces in the thought process very gradually, in the natural course of graduating from the internal dynamics of texts and

intertextualities towards the larger episteme, as we progressively ask more and more fundamental questions.

The unhealthier version of interdisciplinarity entails quick, efficient and diluted course modules under the “cafeteria” system catering to students flitting in and out of virtual or actual classrooms across the country. Would this really foster forward-looking problem-solving and crisis management? Would it leave teacher-facilitators any time and energy for research?

How is such intensive research practice to be reconciled with the very diverse demands of teaching multiple interdisciplinary courses across four undergraduate years besides supervising research at full capacity? Such research and teaching tend to be compatible only when there is reasonable overlap or porosity between areas covered in these two practices. How will that be sustained, given the slow but by no means imperceptible shrinking of faculty positions? How will that survive the equally perceptible thrusting of administrative responsibilities upon the already beleaguered faculty?

Even more importantly, a floating population of students contradicts the very emphasis laid by the NEP on placing the human teacher at the “center” of the learning experience (MHRD 4). While there is legitimate reason to discourage in-breeding within departments and institutions, the panacea is hardly to be sought in encouraging students to drift from one fetching signboard to another. Across my years as a teacher, I have been asked to write letters of reference and recommendation for students aspiring to study abroad many times. Some met with success; several did not. In writing each and every one of them, however, I had to draw upon my personal, intuitive reading of the candidates as subject-persons, in relation to their peers, their chosen discipline, and my interactions with them within and outside the classroom over years. I cannot conceive of writing a letter of recommendation for someone I have known or taught only a single semester. The loss is theirs, and mine. For the human learning process is mutual and slow.

This is a particular concern in view of the NEP’s stipulation that there should be a transparent ongoing continuous protocol of documented self-appraisal across tiers of the teaching gradient (21-22, 29, 36, 41, 47, 54, and 55). Going by my own teaching and mentoring experience, transparency of method, visibility of evidence and parameters, and citation of findings are very much Western tenets of acceptable research work. Research methodology as a compulsory component of doctoral coursework has quickly emerged as a crucial litmus test for producing internationally acceptable research output. NEP wants to reorient us back towards a learning process that does not naturally lend itself to intensive, rigorous, discipline-centric, West-derived research methodology. The congruency between these two elements will have to be carefully cultivated.

I do not doubt the need to introduce interdisciplinarity and independent scholarship early on in the university curriculum; some ramification of that may be seen in the combined study of history, geography, civics, and economics in the CBSE secondary school curriculum. Even so, a genuinely interdisciplinary methodology is a rigorous and exacting one, with a compelling need to rationalize the theoretical implications of diverse disciplinary tools, and rationalize their viability in interpreting the text(s) in hand and the discourse they participate in. At university, easy cross-cultural comparatism is discouraged in favor of immersive, historically contextualized micro-studies of texts that come one after another diachronically or are contiguous, i.e., neighbors in time, space, language, and cultural premises.

For NEP to succeed, we shall need sustained collaboration between specialists in Western methodology and specialists in Indian aesthetics and research methodologies, Sanskritic and vernacular, in order that we may groom the young university entrants in comparative approaches.

It would bode well for departments of languages and comparative literature to merge. Initially, at least, the clash of aesthetics and methodologies will be potent and will undoubtedly create new class systems based on unstable, impressionist biases and predispositions about this or that methodology.

Will new-age professional Indian women be able to fulfill their academic commitments while living up to NEP's image of the teacher as an ever-giving *Gaia*, or *Annapurna*³? The challenge is steep. It would entail a fundamental reorientation of our own understanding of our roles and function in academics and society. All through my own academic life, for instance, I have found it difficult to assume agency for myself. I have always tended to see myself as a consort or aid to men's research. I have seen myself as an influencer, facilitator, inspirer, but not as a primary agent. And when I have, I have been thwarted by competing self-inflicting demands that had become a necessary part of my self-perception as a needed entity, and what is a woman if not needed?

A lot of women in academics today find it difficult to reconcile the demands of teaching, research, and administration while being the kind of mother and wife and home manager they have been expected to be. Either a healthy family life is disincentivized or women are tacitly coerced into nuclear family models in order to maintain the semblance of a work-life balance. A lot of young women academics today find themselves living apart from their spouses and family. Some choose to remain single. Single or married, women academics do not deserve to be condemned to lifelong loneliness or unrelieved toil.

Whether we work in laboratory-based sciences, fieldwork-based social or epidemiological sciences, or in the library-classroom-based humanities, academic work draws upon a degree of T.S. Eliot's undissociated sensibility and resists the arrangement of work and leisure around externally stipulated working hours and spaces. In the case of women, particularly, this automatically results in an extension of the workplace into one's home and vice versa. Such practices prove to be very difficult for older family members, who are used to slower, more laid-back work cultures and lifestyles, to fathom and accept. The fissures thus created, and the consequent necessity of maintaining separate households, means that all parties across age groups are deprived of the dividends of an integrated family life. The channels for communication and emotional sustenance within the family required for a healthy professional life shrink. Long-distance caregiving for them in turn becomes an added emotional and logistical challenge. They end up feeling torn between a reluctance to negotiate complex interpersonal friction ensuing from living with elders and the loneliness of living apart.

Collegiality at the Workplace and in the Community: The Way Forward

Academics was not such a lonely trudge in the past, because it was not so achievement-oriented, so fiercely competitive, or so dependent on the quantification of feedback and productivity. Now that it is, we women must rally together and be one another's colleagues in the most complete sense of the term.

The first step, however, in the direction of becoming empowered, ethical stakeholders lies with us, women. We need working groups founded upon genuine collegiality, involving faculty and students from across disciplines, rather than any declared or implicit ideological predisposition. Are we ready to listen to one another without prejudice? To accept the fact that we

³ Both figures are Earth-mothers. Gaia is the Greek goddess of the Earth, and similarly Appurna is a Hindu goddess who is the giver-of-food.

will never all see things the same way, and yet strategize that same plurality in our collective interventions towards a larger consensus?

Collegiality is something I have come to value deeply over the years, given my own physical distance from my blood kin. One's relationship with colleagues is a work in progress but a vital link in the mental well-being amid the academic grind. The relationship dynamics between colleagues, who meet one another every day and yet do not share the same equation as with family and childhood friends, affords a unique trajectory for mature interpersonal evolution. Sustaining a support system demands skills of adjustment and forgiveness at the workplace. In negotiating something as vital as everyday relationships, we must learn to "forgive the unforgivable," a phrase I am borrowing from a talk by Nikita Dhawan at a literary fest in March 2022 (Dhawan).

We women in academics can only meaningfully collaborate across disciplines and contribute as stakeholders in the NEP if we begin to accept plurality among ourselves, across caste, class, and boundaries of sexual or political orientation. Experience tells me that this is not easy at all. Women do not automatically take to other women, any more than men automatically get along with men.

Our progressive education in collegiality as a civilizational goal would entail accepting and tolerating one another's emotional vicissitudes, particularly anger. Anger has always been otherized and shamed as unfeminine. It is time we inwardly acknowledged that we women can get very angry, but that we can only leverage that anger towards a positive trajectory of growth if we come to accept the naturalness of anger non-normatively. Mutual tolerance and compassion will translate into little practices on a daily basis, e.g., tolerating one another's sartorial habits and other women's negotiations of the co-educational space. It will mean not treating women colleagues as rivals or competitors in relationship dynamics involving men. It will involve the difficult terrain of negotiating inter-gender relationships with students inside and outside institutions and the even more difficult one of negotiating digital channels of communication in the age of social networking.

Above all, it will entail acceptance of women from within our ranks embracing positions of power and decision-making. The more we normalize working under women as opposed to working only with other women under men's leadership, the less hostile we shall be towards women in authoritative positions and they towards us. Much of the negativity will be neutralized once we stop demonizing women who are good in leadership roles and as team players.

Foucault writes, "The manifest discourse, therefore, is really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say; and this 'not-said' is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said" (25). The real challenge of the National Education Policy lies not in acknowledging its high idealism, but in the very thing it devotes its short final section to: implementation on the field (MHRD 59). A collegial neighborhood of committed women academics would look for a degree of autonomy of thought in translating the spirit and letter of the vision into work.

Works Cited

- Bhattacharya, Shrayana. *Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh: India's Lonely Young Women and the Search for Intimacy and Independence*. Harper Collins India, 2021.
- Dhawan, Nikita, and Ganguly, Swati. "Nabanna Earth Weekend 2022 - Day 2 Session 2." *YouTube*, uploaded by SAMT Nabanna, 4 April 2022.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0j9xAj7CreY>
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. Pantheon Books, 1972.

“Hargila.” *YouTube*. Uploaded by Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 10 January 2022. Leach, Neil., ed. *Rethinking Architecture. A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Routledge, 1997.
Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). *National Education Policy*. 2020.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yeYV4UjdxM>

“When we #SeeEqual, we #ShareTheLoad.” YouTube, uploaded by Ariel India, 10 February, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DA64FF7MR58>