

**Indian Association for Women's Studies: Southern Regional Workshop**  
**FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES AND THE STRUGGLE TO TRANSFORM**  
**THE DISCIPLINES**

**IAWS and the Dept of Women's Studies, UTC, Bangalore: 2-3 Feb. 2007**

**Part A. SUMMARY**

Over the last two decades there has been a spurt of studies on women being carried out both from within academic institutions and in the non-government sector. Whether in women's studies, the conventional disciplines, or new areas of enquiry, some of the best research uses feminist perspectives and concepts of patriarchy, gender division of labour, gender equality and justice in insightful ways. Such research has contributed to expanding disciplinary boundaries and also to strengthening the women's movement from which it has drawn inspiration. The resistance to change is, however, deep-seated among sections of academics, practitioners and the public.

**Objective**

The purpose of the IAWS Southern Regional Workshop was to share our experiences and learnings across conventional disciplines in the humanities, the social and natural sciences as well as new areas of study. The workshop was perceived as a step towards the long-term goal of documenting and taking stock of our own struggles to transform the approach and methodology of a range of disciplines in India.

**Themes**

The workshop covered topics in a wide range of subject areas, moving from sociology, economics, psychology and natural science to applied areas of public health, agriculture and veterinary science. New areas of feminist enquiry in India that were addressed included cultural and Dalit studies, Public discourse, theology and religious studies. While recognising the significance of feminist engagement with disciplines such as history, law and education, the workshop was not able to cover these because of constraints of time.

## **Papers**

A large number of background materials, besides draft papers and power point presentations were circulated to participants prior to the workshop. Over the course of two days, 20 illuminating presentations were made, each one generating very lively discussions. The detailed workshop report, some photographs, all the papers/ presentations (including a video clip) and the list of participants will be available on a CD of the workshop proceedings. The **Workshop Report** (see below) draws both upon the contributed papers and the presentations made; it follows the planned sequence of the workshop rather than the actual sequence of presentations. (Because of unavoidable reasons, in certain cases the presentations could not be made, or could not be made in their logical sequence.)

## **Participation**

Over 65 participants including outstation participants from Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and local participants from Bangalore attended the workshop. They were mainly academics (ranging from doctoral students to senior professors) but also included practitioners and activists attempting to do a 'different kind of research'.

The workshop was able to keep punctually to the schedule, without any time over-runs, as all the speakers kept to their allotted time. This was necessary because of the importance given to the discussions. There were lively interactions in every session which was possible because of the number and informed participation of the group.

## **Outcomes**

The main practical outcomes of the workshop were:

- 1) The decision to continue the networking of researchers in the region for sharing information and ideas within and across disciplines; and the need to explore different ways of doing this.
- 2) The felt need for a follow-up workshop to concretise methodological issues related to interdisciplinary research; and the coming together of an informal group that would explore how best to do this.
- 3) Ideas for sub-themes that could be included in the IAWS Silver Jubilee National Conference in early 2008, such as: Community theatre and feminist concerns; the Generational Divide in Indian Feminism; and Methodological struggles in Indian feminism.

4) The need for ‘guidelines’/ ‘models’/ examples of curricula for women’s studies courses (of various durations and on different themes) to be made available more widely to academics and practitioners. The IAWS newsletter has made a beginning; the possibility of doing this more extensively through the IAWS website could be explored.

### **Acknowledgements**

The workshop was co-sponsored by IAWS and the Women’s Studies Department, United Theological College, Bangalore. The coordinators were Sumi Krishna and M. Indira (Mysore University) on behalf of IAWS and Rini Ralte and Rev. Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar on behalf of UTC.

Various sessions were facilitated by K. G. Gayathri Devi (Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore), Carol Upadhyaya (National Institute for Advanced Studies, Bangalore), P. Thamizoli (M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai), S. Anandhi (Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai), Sumi Krishna (Independent researcher, Bangalore) and Vanaja Dhruvarajan (Carleton University, Canada).

Rapporteurship was done mainly by Suparna Kar (Christ College, Bangalore) with Anitha Ravindra Kumar, Cynthia Stephen, Rev. A. John Baptist, Kishori Nayak, Sr. Kochurani Abraham, S. Maya, Sr. Margaret Devadoss, Mini Sukumar, Shree Herlekar, Veena and Vinalini Mathrani covering particular sessions or presentations.

The detailed Workshop Report (see below) has been prepared by Sumi Krishna. The Draft Report was circulated to the facilitators and speakers for comments, which have also been incorporated.

## **Part B. DETAILED REPORT of the IAWS SOUTHERN REGIONAL WORKSHOP**

**By Sumi Krishna with inputs from workshop rapporteurs**

Contact: [iawspresident@gmail.com](mailto:iawspresident@gmail.com)

### **Introduction**

The IAWS Southern Regional Workshop on **Feminist Perspectives and the Struggle to Transform the Disciplines** was jointly organised by the Indian Association for Women's Studies and the Women's Studies Department, Untied Theological College, at UTC, Bangalore on 2nd and 3rd Feb. 2007. The **Rev. Dr. O.V. Jathanna**, Principal UTC, greeted the participants and briefly described the objectives of the theological seminary. **Dr. Lalrinawmi (Rini) Ralte**, Chairperson Women's Studies Department, UTC, welcomed the participants and described the evolution of the Women's Studies Programme as a discipline in theology and the growth of the department within UTC. From its small beginnings about a decade ago, the department was now able to offer courses taken by all theology students, who were mainly men. But the institutional 'struggle to survive' continued, she said.

Introducing the workshop, IAWS President **Sumi Krishna** said the IAWS mandate was to support a critical perspective on issues of concern to women, through networking with universities, research institutions and individual scholars and practitioners. The association completes 25 years in September 2007 and can be proud of having maintained the dynamism and synergy of an all-India organisation. IAWS had facilitated the introduction of Women's Studies (WS) in the higher education system in India. Together with other women's groups it has also influenced public policy and discourse to some extent. But many challenges remain in bringing critical feminist perspectives to bear across disciplines, in establishing and gaining recognition for alternative methodologies, as also in documenting our own evolution and that of WS across India. This workshop was part of a series of seven/ eight workshops being held by IAWS in the run up to the Silver Jubilee National Conference next year that would focus on various aspects of feminist knowledge production. Taking advantage of the unique diversity of professionals of different disciplines, practitioners and activist members of IAWS, the Southern Regional Workshop was intended to open up a 'dialogue of

disciplines’. She put forward three questions for participants to dwell upon: a) what is the challenge that feminism poses to various disciplines; b) what are the institutional and systemic obstacles to change; and c) how should we mobilise for change? These questions were also reflected in the logical structure of the workshop: from conventional disciplines to applied disciplines to public discourse.

In her Opening Remarks, **Dr. Devaki Jain**, founder and former Director of the Institute for Social Studies Trust (ISST), which was one of the founding institutions of IAWS, drew attention to the ‘remarkable gathering’ of persons, many of whom had carried women’s studies/ feminist studies forward in politically significant ways. Setting a reflective tone for the workshop, she shared a few propositions from her recent work on the problematiques and dilemmas of responding to the quest in the workshop theme: *the struggle to transform the disciplines*. She suggested that there was value in ‘knowledge’, making visible facts and challenging theories and stratifications, such knowledge outlived practice. Campaigns and advocacy, women’s bonding and strategising, were necessary but had not been sufficiently powerful in intervening as knowledge. Discussing the ‘problematique of identity’, she said a ‘room of one’s own’ gave space for self-strength but could also become a ghetto; hence, for example, the familiar dilemma of ‘mainstreaming’ gender in development. Discussing the ‘problematique of theorising’, she said the feminist discourse had challenged dogma, raised questions of what constitutes knowledge and how disciplinary divisions are created. This was politically disturbing because fields of study had to change in multiple ways, to be re-ploughed and replanted to bring in women. Women’s theorising had been marked by *neti-neti* (not this-not this), seeking definition by negation as in the discourse of the Upanishads. While the women’s movement has had a strong political presence, the ground situation for women in poverty has worsened. We need analytically powerful ideas, truths that grip the imagination and speak to the felt needs of a mass of women. Drawing on ‘the well of women’s knowing’ (both experiential and intellectual), their collective *gyana*, could bring about a revolution in ideas that could stop the present catastrophic global trajectory.

## **THEMES**

### **1. Social sciences: Sociology and Economics**

**Carol Upadhya**, Associate Prof of Sociology, National Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) Bangalore, outlined the ‘intersections, injections and iterations’ in the relationship between

feminism and sociology. Exploring the feminist critique of sociology in the West and in India, she said that in the 1960s and 1970s the critique of male-centric knowledge had grown out of feminist politics and there was a search for grand theories of patriarchy and gender equality. During the 1980s-90s, the practices of social anthropology had shifted. The concept of social construction showing how gender was linked to other social factors became one of the main theoretical themes, but the distinction between biology and culture was blurred in work on embodied sexualities. The politics of knowledge production, feminist methodologies of reflexivity and the situated researcher, and qualitative methods also gained currency. As gender became a primary category of experience in sociology and anthropology, there was a sweeping critique of the androcentricity of mainstream disciplines. She emphasised the difference between feminist methodology, which is political, and sociology that seeks to be academic and 'value-neutral'. Feminist knowledge may have been added to sociological literature but gender has not been acknowledged as a central issue by major theorists like Giddens, Habermas and Bourdieu. In India, the sociology of gender and WS has been located at the bottom of the hierarchy and marginalised among mainstream disciplines, despite sociology and anthropology being concerned with many of the questions raised by WS. Drawing upon the work of Mary John and Patricia Uberoi, she pointed out that the inner sphere of culture that women occupy has remained untouched by mainstream sociologists like M.N. Srinivas who unpacked the practice of dowry from an economic rather than cultural perspective. Although patriarchy is most explicit in kinship and family, which have been extensively studied in India, the extensive transformation of the discipline that had occurred in the West has not happened here and there are several unresolved issues: the artificiality of the sex-gender distinction; the need for a more complex and multivariate concept of gender; the tension between universalism and particularism in feminism, anthropology/ sociology; the need to incorporate gender and other feminist concepts into mainstream social theory; and the need for theoretical blending of historical/ political/ cultural/ perspectives, the artificiality of disciplinary divides being itself the subject of feminist critique.

Several interventions focused on how this exposition resonates with what is happening in other disciplines, such as economics, and the resistance to feminist methodology in science. It was suggested that it would be more appropriate to talk of 'knowing' which reflects process rather than knowledge which is focused on the product. A reference was made to Sharmila Rege's work, which showed that students from non-dominant groups had influenced research

agendas and helped to change research methodologies. It was also pointed out that WS itself may lack a critical feminist perspective.

**Dr. Ratna Kumari**, Associate Prof. of Economics, Andhra University, Vishakapatnam, surveyed the efforts to bring feminist perspectives into economics in India through a series of conferences/ workshops that had been organised by feminist-minded economists (Devaki Jain, Nirmala Banerjee, U Kalpagam, Padmini Swaminathan, Indira Hirway, Maithreyi Krishnaraj and Joy Ranadive-Deshmukh) and by IAWS. She asked whether gender could best be treated as an interdisciplinary field, as exemplified by Bina Agarwal's work on land rights? Or whether we should build theory from practice, as had been by Devaki Jain a few years ago. Was it necessary to go beyond economic theory to find explanations for women's situation? And if so, how do we integrate different theories? Feminists had challenged methods of defining and measuring women's work, the concept of the household as a homogenous entity, the sexual division of labour, and the assumption that all players are equal in the market. But the issue of integrating gender perspectives into economic theory remained. Could the fundamentals of economic theory be changed? **Dr. T. Jyothi Rani**, Professor of Economics, Kakatiya University Warangal (Andhra Pradesh) who had in 1982 founded the 'Society For Women's Studies And Development', of which she is at present the coordinator, described the struggle to introduce a specialisation paper on the 'Economics of Women's Studies' at the M.A. Economics level in 1989. This was the first such paper in Andhra Pradesh in a 'mainstream' discipline like Economics. Her interest in economic theory was reflected in her analysis of the dominant schools of economic thought and her urging that economic issues be viewed from a gender perspective.

The interventions that followed talked of the historical tracing of gender bias that challenged fundamental macro-economic models. It was the inter-disciplinarity of WS that made other disciplines uncomfortable. It was suggested that concepts of 'public goods' and the 'care economy' should become part of mainstream economics. Because of universalising tendencies that do not differentiate between the labour of women and men, the methodologies to capture different conditions of women's labour were lacking. Women's economic work was invisible as in SEZs, which were not sensitive to women's needs despite their greater contribution. Participants said there was need to take a class position with regard to women's identity rather than talk of gender in generic terms.

## **2. Psychology and Public Health**

**Dr. U Vindhya**, Professor of Psychology and currently Convener, Dr. Durgabai Deshmukh Centre for Women's Studies, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, discussed the impact of feminism on psychology in India. Psychology, the science of 'individual adjustment', is a conservative discipline compared to feminism, the voice of the collective, which is destabilising. There is an unresolved tension between the two. Since Freud, the androcentric bias in psychology has had a stereotypical view of women. There have been shifts in perspective from 'women-less psychology' to the study of 'women as the problem'. The study of sex differences has taken the male as the norm, advancing models of variability to show that women's brains are not able to deal with various tasks. This has been used to justify the exclusion of girls and women from math and their confinement to home science. The 'deficit model' treats women as deficient; this leads to 'victim blaming' or 'mother blaming'. Referring to the bio-medical domination of clinical psychology, she mentioned the term *hysteria*, used for a medical condition that was thought to be peculiar to women because it was caused by disturbances of the uterus. Women's distress (*hysteria*) was seen as being based on biological causes while men's distress was seen as being externally-induced. The psychology of gender relations had passed through different stages from an emphasis on sex-differences to viewing gender as a principle of the social structure; presently, all of these stages could be seen in India, but there is more indigenous research now. Academic studies continue to have an uncritical focus on the work-family linkage. But current researches by NGOs and advocacy groups are furthering a cross-disciplinary and critical perspective on women's lived experience. The difference between the two approaches is striking. There are also gaps in research because of a greater focus on statistics and neglect of the empirical. (Vindhya's own research has primarily been on the mental health of women, domestic violence and the psychological dynamics of women's political activism.) In conclusion, she said that the pattern of women's mental disorders is role-related rather than organic/biological but this is not recognised in the National Mental Health programme, which is geared to the severe mental disorders that characterise men.

**Dr. Sundari Ravindran**, Honorary Prof. at the Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies at the Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences and Technology

(SCTIMST), Thiruvanthapuram, is an applied economist who has worked for many years in grassroots public health programmes. She spoke of the need to integrate gender into the curricula of public health professionals. Because of the sexist bias in the construction of medical knowledge, the male is the norm and women's health issues are ignored. Women's health-seeking behaviour is constrained by the lack of time, mobility and money. The long-term effects of ill health have different implications for women and men. For instance, the national tuberculosis programme focuses on pulmonary TB, which is most common among men, while neglecting other forms of the disease from which women suffer more. So too the cardio-vascular symptoms of women are termed 'atypical'. It was after major conferences (such as that in Beijing in 1995) that women's health issues came into focus in India, with work on curriculum development and the integration of violence against women being viewed as health issues. The SCTIMST's gender and medical health education initiative began by gender sensitising work with the faculty. Three modules were developed from a gender, rights and ethics perspective. Areas for change within the medical syllabus were identified and outlines of gendered objectives were developed. Planning for action required moving gender forward in a 'hostile environment'. The training initiative resulted in a core group of committed medical educators and public health professionals and gender sensitive research. (For instance, a forensic scientist looked at forensics with a gender lens.) A major challenge is that gender inequity is not perceived because of assumed medical (biological) reasons. Another challenge is to address health needs from a transgender perspective. In conclusion, she said there was need to move beyond critiques to create alternative solutions. 'Mainstreaming' requires 'dilution and compromise'. We could either be exclusive and 'pure' or inclusive and forward moving.

Development practitioner **Shoba Raja**, Director of Basic Needs, a registered UK charity that works with hundreds of thousands of persons affected by epilepsy and other mental illnesses in seven countries including India, said the organisation has a vast amount of data on mental illness but needs help in analysing this. Moving away from a bio-medical, clinical approach, the evidence suggests that both biology and social causes contribute to mental illness. The intersection of gender and poverty influences the mental health of women and is de-humanising. Basic Needs raises several questions in order to address policy issues. Although much of the evidence is anecdotal, gender is definitely a strong factor. The stigma against mental health works differently due to gender; for instance, the marriage prospects are

affected for girls of the families of an ill person. Gender also influences the family's responses to mental illness; female care-givers outnumber men and long decades of care-giving affects the women. The gender blindness in policy is mirrored by the neglect of mental health, in terms of resources for treatment, opportunities for livelihood etc. As there is no policy critique, the government is under no pressure to change, she said.

Several issues in the area of psychology and public health emerged in the discussions. It was argued that the state's attempt to characterise farmers' suicides as a mental problem ignored the socio-economic aspects. The cross-disciplinary discipline of Development Studies had been challenged into studying female suicides in Kerala. Other interventions dealt with the reasons for depression being more common in women; they are more exposed and vulnerable due to their role as care-givers but psychology does not seem to engage with these issues. It was also pointed out that in contrast to the linkages being developed between psychoanalysis and feminism, psychology as a discipline seemed resistant to integration into the social sciences. Its normative content has remained the heterosexual family and there is a big gap between academic psychologists and the critical research on poverty, mental health and gender that is coming from concerned NGOs. Several psychological concepts have also been taken over by management studies. With psychology entering the corporate sector, the emphasis is on maintaining the status quo. This raises issues of medical ethics. An instance from the IT sector was cited; the staff psychologist had said: 'I cannot tell my employer that they are over-working the staff.' It was also mentioned that there was little money for public health research, apart from research on women's reproductive health. Gendered training in the medical field was required, and while there was openness in some quarters to WS groups coming in to provide the training, on the whole the skills to do this were lacking.

### **3. Natural Science, Agriculture and Veterinary Science**

Discussing the gendered content of the natural science disciplines, independent Bangalore-based researcher on environment, development and gender, **Sumi Krishna** pointed out that since the 1970s feminist studies in the West had examined the devaluation and exclusion of women's perspectives in science, especially the natural sciences. This had led to extensive feminist critiques, particularly of some of the life science disciplines. But this enquiry has been almost entirely missing in India despite the rhetoric of integrating gender-sensitivity into natural science policies and programmes. Highlighting certain widely prevalent attitudes held

by young conservation scientists, she argued that these attitudes were partly derived from the gender-biased assumptions embedded in the natural sciences, which had resonances with the earlier discussion on the bio-medical assumptions of psychology. Gender-bias was embedded in the metaphors used to describe human fertilisation, the systems of botanical nomenclature and classification, and theories of the evolution of hierarchical (unequal) complementarity between the sexes. Drawing attention to what she called the ‘key-stone stories’ of science, she mentioned the enduring narratives of the ‘passive female’ and the ‘active male’ in embryology; of ‘man the hunter’ in anthropology; and the ‘new hero stories’ of the ‘genetic man’ in molecular biology. The attitudes of scientists and the technologies and practices related to natural resources have been influenced by the sociobiological assumptions that gender roles and behaviour are determined by biology and genetics. In conclusion, she said that we need to recognise that the language and theories of science are socially-situated, that the ‘truths’ of biology and the natural sciences are not time-less and value-free, that women are not a homogenous category, and that the way forward is to understand, unpack and resist the gendered discourse of science in India.

Various interventions raised the issue that gender-biased belief systems and attitudes were also internalised by women, that upper caste women shared notions such as that merit was a matter of DNA, as was apparent in the entire debate on reservations in higher education. But we need to go beyond ‘naming the problem’ to undertaking ‘research from within’. We need methodologies to bring in class, caste and gender. It was also pointed out that the ‘outdated’ functional explanations of sociobiology had migrated from the social sciences to the sciences. Apart from being based on faulty logic, the normative ideas of sociobiology were offending.

With regard to the agricultural sciences (in a contribution that was circulated but could not be presented at the workshop), **Mina Swaminathan**, Adviser, Education, Communication and Gender, M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), Chennai, pointed out that insensitivity to the social context in which agriculture is embedded was ‘a chronic and debilitating malady’ affecting both the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and the National Agricultural Research Systems of developing countries. The roots of this lay in the US and European conception of ‘agricultural science’ that was based on the Enlightenment paradigm of science and the ‘scientific method’ as a tool for the ‘conquest of nature’. This was adopted by former colonies including India, excluding

traditional agricultural knowledges and the plurality of agricultural practices in the country. The rapid expansion of the agricultural research and education system after Independence created a network of institutions, all functioning on a 'technological model'. In the agricultural universities girls tend to be channelled into home economics; courses on rural sociology present a sanitised version of the village community, divorced from caste, gender and politics. The MSSRF's attempt to change this through a two-credit module on 'Gender Issues in Agriculture and Rural Development' developed in 2005, has not yet been taken up by a single agricultural university.

In a case study from Mizoram, **Dr. Rini Ralte**, Chairperson, Department of Women's Studies, UTC, spoke of land being the 'centre of the community'. Traditionally, community land was under the stewardship of the village Chief and there was no private holding of farming or of pastoral lands. As everything springs from the land, it was considered sacred and riches could not be gained by selling and buying land. Women were associated with the traditional animistic faiths but Christianity absorbed the ancient deities and women's knowledge of healing for example was dismissed. In the process of economic development, the land system has changed and the forest economy has been destroyed. The subsistence agriculture of the past was based on *jhum*, that is, shifting cultivation [slash and burn] and each village was self-sufficient with a diversity of crops. The agricultural system based on mutual cooperation was central to the 'rudimentary tribal economy' and tribal socio-cultural life. This was the key to village solidarity. The land gave both individuals and the community a sense of belonging and identity. But insurgency and the struggle for statehood destroyed the customary relationship to land. Alienation from the land meant alienation from culture and personhood. Her study of the displacement of diversity in crops in two villages, showed that government cash crop schemes had not worked and food security was on the decline as the state was geared towards value addition, export and marketability of food. Mizoram faces an ecological crisis and land-holding regimes need to be reformed. The study also showed that the close-knit community spirit was deeply linked to patriarchy and was allied to the newly rising capitalist forces. Traditionally, women did not have a voice in decision-making; so they could not raise a voice about food security and self-reliance. She said Mizoram's Customary Law is deeply oppressive of women and needs to be changed.

In another case study on gender roles and gender relations in two agro-biodiversity rich areas, **Dr. R. Rengalakshmi**, senior agricultural scientist with MSSRF, Chennai, said that women in traditional agricultural communities have long been known for their specialised knowledge related to seeds including selection, storage, exchange and management. This experiential knowledge gave women an important role in decision-making in the family and community. This gave women status and contributed to equitable power relations between genders. But changes in the agricultural production systems across different agro-ecosystems have led to changes in gender roles, responsibilities and knowledge. She described how interventions to strengthen the conservation of agro-biodiversity had led to exploring the relationship of women's knowledge to their status/ gender relations in two very different locations in the Eastern Ghats: one, the small millet-growing area in the Kolli Hills, Tamil Nadu, inhabited by a culturally homogenous tribal group known as Malayali (hill people) and the other, the rice-growing Jeypore tract of Orissa, inhabited by 29 tribes dominated by the Gadaba, Paroja and Bhumia. The ethnographic information indicated that gender relations were somewhat more egalitarian in the Jeypore tract than in the Kolli Hills. MSSRF had attempted to revive the cultivation of small millets in Kolli Hills through creating demand and market linkages, and had tried to improve the productivity of traditional paddy landraces in the Jeypore tract. It also facilitated 'enabling services' such as reducing women's drudgery in processing and forming Community Seed Banks. The study found that the value of women's knowledge was based on the use and demand for such knowledge and that this was clearly linked to the rise or fall in production of particular crops. No clear conclusions could be drawn on the impact of new marketing strategies and newly created social institutions like seed banks. In conclusion, she said that in the long run, gendered knowledge in agro-biodiversity can play a significant role in bringing about more equitable gender relations only when women's knowledge is 'needed, enhanced and recognised'.

This resonated with comments made earlier by Hyderabad-based veterinary doctor and development activist **Dr. Sagari Ramdas**, who is cofounder-director of ANTHRA, an NGO that has been attempting to practice 'a different kind of research' and fight the 'derecognition of women's knowledge'. Speaking of the inter-linkages between gender, livestock and livelihoods, she pointed out that the women in Adilabad district in Andhra Pradesh had recently been given World Bank loans to buy Murrah buffaloes instead of the local breeds that they had wanted. The huge Murrah buffaloes are a milking breed found in Haryana,

which the women felt were not suitable for the climatic conditions and terrain of Adilabad. But the women had no choice in the matter. Their knowledge of local conditions and their preference was dismissed as being 'unscientific'. The Haryana Murrah buffaloes (bought at the cost of Rs.15000 per buffalo) did not do well in Adilabad, yielding little milk, and even dying. The women were left with no milking animals and huge loans. This has sent many SHGs in the area spiralling into indebtedness. She said that this was only one of many examples that showed that science and technology are not politically neutral or gender neutral. The tendency to dismiss women's knowledge and indigenous knowledge ignores centuries of accumulated skills, knowledge of the technology of animal breeding and knowledge of local conditions, such as the disappearance of fodder. Simply 'adding' gender as a factor into a programme is not sufficient because it does not recognise the technological interface. She argued that the larger political framework had to be kept in mind. For the women, farming and livestock activities were one, but in the formal system agriculture and livestock have been separated and the division is becoming sharper. Animal husbandry has become a medical science rather than a livelihood activity. The veterinary extension system has collapsed and in the XI Plan the focus is on the private delivery of veterinary care. In conclusion, she said the politics of technical research is driven by globalisation.

This led to a discussion on women's livelihoods that covered a wide range of issues from organic farming methods to the need for interdisciplinary research. It was pointed out that interventions needed to be structured in an empowerment framework, and that feminism needed to be strengthened by a political perspective.

#### **4. Cultural Studies and Dalit Studies**

Speaking on 'Women Studies and Cultural Studies', **Dr. Tejaswani Niranjana**, Director, Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore, started by discussing the historical development of cultural studies in the West. She pointed out that cultural studies had preceded WS and had come into prominence in various fields in the 1990s with a special focus on feminism. British cultural studies, for instance, had been marked by debates surrounding feminism and race. The situation in many Asian contexts seemed to be rather different. Instead of feminism being 'an interruption of already established ways of studying culture critically, it was foundational to the emergence of the new area of cultural studies'. The colonial history of Asia had led to cultural studies being encompassed by the discourse

on nationalism and modernity. In the non-West, feminism and nationalism share a close relationship, as Sri Lankan feminist Kumari Jayawardena had argued in *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. The consequences for women are serious when the ‘culture question’ becomes a ‘national culture question’. Although nationalist movements have enabled women’s political participation, they have also created a fixed position for women in national culture. In Japan, Korea, India, the New Woman and the Modern Woman were sought to be differentiated, with the new woman being privileged over the modern. In India, women are seen as being ‘intrinsically linked with culture’. Since 2000, a series of feminist discussions in different Asian locations, including one in Bangalore brought cultural studies into focus and provided the impetus for rethinking the political. In India, WS was the earliest location within the University for articulating the concerns of cultural studies. Indeed, WS contributed to the ‘rupturing of the disciplines’ enabling the emergence of inter-disciplinary scholarship and leading to the formation of cultural studies. Speaking of the experience of teaching gender studies and cultural studies, she said these were not clearly outlined disciplines, rather ways of approaching a problem area.

In the ensuing discussion, participants raised questions about the influence of post modernity in cultural studies and the usefulness of the linkages between cultural studies and WS. The issue was whether the inter-dependency between cultural studies and WS was organic and mutually beneficial. Various views were also expressed on the changing interests of the younger generation, and of young feminists, with regard to the question of patriarchy and the place of gender studies as a discipline.

Approaching cultural issues from the perspective of Dalit studies, **Dr. Maya Pandit**, Centre for Instruction in English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL), Hyderabad, talked about ‘Dalit autobiographies and integrating difference’. She said Dalit autobiographies are rather ‘socio-biographies’, testimonies that reveal an interplay of various theories, a fractured modernity and the lived experience of difference. They provide utopian visions and raise issues for feminist transformative, emancipative politics. Dalit feminism involves a three-fold critique of the feminist movement, the Dalit movement and the Left movement, exposing the limitations of each. In the Dalit feminist view, sisterhood was a problematic concept. Feminist models epitomise the typically Brahmanical, upper middle class woman; this model is simply equated with Dalit and Muslim women. The critique of the Dalit movement

is that it is very strongly grounded in patriarchy, ignoring the challenges posed by Dalit women. The Left movement is similarly critiqued for opposing 'difference' because it seen as sidetracking resistance against inequality. Dalit feminism reveals the difficulties of 'homogenised' concepts. Dalit feminist autobiographies do not celebrate their difference but critically analyse the factors like religion, family and patriarchy that constitute their difference into various modes of oppression. Dalit feminist autobiographies/ socio-biographies raise issues of family and violence. The idea of resistance expressed in these autobiographies is significant *and needs to be read as emancipatory politics*.

In a paper that could not be presented, **Sr. Dr. Margaret Shanthi** who heads the Women's Study Centre, ICM congregation, Dindigul, Tamil Nadu, mentioned four parallel forces in human history, 'slavery-colonialism, racism-casteism, patriarchy-sexism, and capitalist globalisation-neo-colonialism' that caused fragmentation, hierarchy and inequality. Her paper questioned whether higher education addresses the discourses of inequality and issues of knowledge formation. Caste oppression was experienced as a 'knowledge system'. While Dalit women's testimonies challenge practices of the caste culture, crying out from a 'victim culture' for empathy and justice is a re-victimisation. The most vulnerable refused to 'be victims'. 'Woman-as-victim is a *cultural* script that evokes sympathy without changing the hierarchical structure', she argued. Dalit women have found ways to reconstruct their identities and struggle against the cultural stereotypes of lower caste women as immoral and promiscuous. Moving beyond male-defined categories of the 'good woman', they have rediscovered the liberating potential of street theatre, folk art, music, puppetry etc. The ICM Sisters' interventions have facilitated the appropriation of dance forms and musical instruments that were used exclusively by Dalit men. The integration of folk forms has become part of an emancipatory knowledge system. There is also a quest for liberating symbols and subversive myths to reconstruct the mental models of classism, casteism and sexism, to enhance Dalit women's 'collective will' to move from being victims to being the protagonists in the struggle to transform structures of inequality and oppression.

Speaking of the Dalit initiative of Anveshi, its coordinator **A. Suneetha**, said the Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad, is a space for researchers from different backgrounds and disciplines to work collectively. Anveshi's belief that WS must challenge received notions of caste, class and community, refigures the notion of research. This is

reflected in its Dalit initiative in Andhra Pradesh. Anveshi was one of the first women's organisations to engage with the question of caste in the wake of the nation-wide protests against the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations for reservations in 1990-91. The Tsundur massacres of Dalits in 1989 and the cases filed after that incident are another benchmark in response to which Anveshi engaged with the questions being raised by the Dalit movements. It was concerned first, with the implications of the normative woman and family-relationship that underlie policymaking in reproductive health, mental health, family/criminal law and education, and how these normative ideals erased/shaped the caste of the subject in the formulation and implementation of policies. Another concern was whether and how the legal and institutional reforms suggested by the women's movements were cognizant of the operation of caste. Since then, Anveshi has built documentation on the Dalit women's movement and their work at the panchayat and higher levels. G. Shyamala's political biography of M. Sadalakshmi, one of the most respected Dalit women leaders in mainstream politics, raises many questions. It also establishes that the Dalit woman's identity is not that of a victim but that of a leader with autonomy. This disintegrates the non-victim/victim dichotomy. Anveshi has also attempted to innovatively intervene in the process of change through education. It has integrated caste analysis into other work, created space for Dalit women, and searched for role models.

The extensive discussion focused on issues of culture, identity, and celebrating difference. Autobiographies could critique society and be emancipatory. The 'touchable tales' of Dalit women seemed to have moved away from the *neti-neti* (not this-not this) approach mentioned earlier by Devaki Jain. It was pointed out that Dalit women's voices expressed the embedded self; there was a qualitative difference in their voicing of rights, and this politics of difference needed to be recognised without it becoming ghettoised.

### **5. Minority Studies and Theology**

Theatre activist **A. Mangai (V. Padma)**, who teaches literature at Stella Maris College, Chennai, talked about the *Therigatha*, the little known compendium of the poetry of Buddhist nuns. *Therigatha* was compiled in the Pali language in the 2nd century BC and contains the works of elder nuns (*theri*). It has 16 cantos and 522 stanzas. The themes cover women's day-to-day life, the ideas of 'thinking' women, and concerns related to a woman's body. Through imagery drawn from the daily experience and work of ordinary women, the poetry discusses

the life and spirituality of women. The verses reflect upon women's 'two finger consciousness' referring to the practice of putting two fingers into the rice to see whether it is cooked, and speak ironically about domestic drudgery, enabling us to understand that the women did not accept the patriarchal gender division of labour: 'O free, indeed! O gloriously free/ Am I in freedom from three crooked things: / From quern, from mortar, from my crookback'd lord.' The female body is re-interpreted in amazingly graphic imagery rooted in the everyday experiences of ordinary women. The women's spiritual quest, their steadfast effort to achieve selfhood is articulated through their poetry with Buddhism being an alternative to Brahmanical patriarchy. *Therigatha* is thus a feminist statement. It has a very important place in the feminist discourse of today because it reveals that practices of feminist assertions are not alien to India. Its relevance to our times is its liberative potential as a religious philosophy that could serve to build an alternative feminist perspective to counter religious fundamentalism. It is also an important alternative source of highlighting the marginal Subaltern consciousness. As in *Manimekalai* (the 6th century Tamil epic of the daughter of a courtesan, who repudiates her training in the art of her caste, takes a vow of chastity and becomes a nun) the personal is made political defying the Tamil literary convention of *akham-puram* (inside-outside).

In a contribution that could not be presented, Hyderabad-based activist **S. Bhashwati**, who has researched the condition of Muslim women in the inner city, avoids the assumption that poverty, illiteracy, alcoholism and other features of a backward community are responsible for the condition of women. She says that in many instances, this forms the backdrop of violence but is not the cause. Rather it is the insidious political and social discrimination that has been practiced against minorities in general and the Muslim communities in particular. Muslim men have resorted to reinforcing obsolete codes of behaviour on their women as a direct response to perceived and real threats that the community senses to their socio-religious identities. While it is doubtful if this serves its alleged purpose, it has resulted in barring the women from discovering their potential through education and other means of learning. That the state and civil society too choose to ignore them violates the Muslim women's fundamental rights as Indian citizens to lead free and full lives. She argues that the violence inflicted upon them in the privacy of their homes, 'heinous as it is, is nothing compared to the discrimination and injustice that they suffer at the hands of civil society', as women and as Muslim women. Equal opportunities in the fields of education and

employment are the only ways of ensuring the Muslim women's empowerment within their communities and without. Even if a fraction of them become active in areas outside the home it is bound to impact the upbringing of children and the quality of lives regardless of income levels.

Feminist activist **D. Sherifa**, President of STEPS, an organisation that she founded and has worked with for nearly two decades on issues of violence against women in Tamil Nadu, said that Muslim women are indeed fighting from their own locations. Over the years, Muslim women had been denied security, identity and equality. Politicians had joined hands with Muslim men in this regard. The Muslim women's *jamaat*, literally a 'gathering' of Muslim women, was started in the small town of Pudukottai, Tamil Nadu. The politicisation of Muslim women (described by V. Geetha as 'one of the most exciting and fraught developments in contemporary Tamil society') now extends to 22 districts in eastern and southern Tamil Nadu. The vulnerability of Muslims as a community makes it difficult to raise questions about women's rights within Islam. Sherifa and STEPS found a way to organise Muslim women, negotiating the narrow path between their own sense of dignity and self respect as women and their responsibility towards the Muslim community. As reflected in a brief video clip on the movement, the Muslim women's *jamaat* has a vision of gender justice that derives from the women's own day-to-day experience and understanding. The *jamaat* enables women to express their rights and find solutions within the framework of their faith. Muslim women are now discussing their problems openly and their *jamaat* has become a place for taking decisions. The women have given a call for education and empowerment of women within the community. The *jamaat* is also the place for prayer and in Pudukottai, the women's *jamaat* is now building their own mosque. Quranic explanations are available to the women in Tamil, the local language. Sherifa's own approach to the Quran places it in a larger democratic context; by encouraging interaction between the women's *jamaat* and non-Muslim women, she and other *jamaat* women are building bridges between their worldview rooted in religious faith and secular feminism, rooted in reason and the law.

The **Rev. Dr. Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar**, WSC, UTC, Bangalore, spoke of faith and ideology from the lens of her experience of teaching feminist theology. Starting with an experiential sharing of her own initiatives to change the tradition by introducing new patterns

in the Christian liturgy, for example by substituting more egalitarian language and expressions in the marriage blessing, she described how feminist perspectives were challenging the overall system of Christian theology. Gender discrimination was common to all religions and her own doctoral research had shown that ‘one’s perception of who God is and one’s own level of self-esteem are key factors that shape the experiences of a woman’. For a long time feminists (including some men) had been more comfortable discussing women’s struggles for justice and rights outside the religious framework. Perhaps this had initially helped to consolidate the secular forces to name experiences of violence and recognise the ‘mischievous role’ that religions sometimes played in legitimising violence against women. (After incidents of religious and caste violence in Gujarat and Andhra, feminists like Susie Tharu had begun to rethink their position on the role of religion in shaping identities and ideologies.) By introducing WS into the main curriculum of the theological seminary, some of the centres of theological learning have succeeded in introducing future pastors and theologians, mainly men, to gender concerns. Feminist theology challenges the conventional set norms and interpretations of theological discourse. It also addresses the class, caste and gender nexus of society, so feminist theology cannot be seen in isolation. Discussing the relation of theology to life, she explained how the teaching of feminist theology facilitates reflection on women’s everyday life experience. The academic-activist gap could be bridged through exposing students of theology to the activities of feminist action groups. In the dialogue that followed, she was asked about the liberative dimensions of feminist Biblical scholarship and also about people’s reactions to the initiatives in subverting existing rituals. She responded that people affirmed the changes and that it is important to underline the hermeneutical principle, which is to affirm the full humanity of women in theory and praxis.

## **6. Public discourse: Translation and Documentation**

**Prof. Katyayani Vidmahe**, professor of Telugu who presently heads the Women’s Studies Department, Kakatiya University, Warrangal, Andhra Pradesh, wrote her paper in Telugu and this was translated into English by Ramu Bannurkar. She said the influence of WS on Telugu literature began with the Marxist and women’s movements in Andhra Pradesh but literary theory continued to draw upon ancient theories that undermined women. Speaking of the literary theory of *Rasa* as expounded by Bharata she said that although it is believed to incorporate the human experiences of both men and women, it actually reflects that of men

alone. Rasa theory deals with the emotive content of art and is connected with the theory of *dhvani* in Sanskrit poetics. The *stahibhava* (or serene emotion) is said to be that of the male protagonist and he alone represents society. The incompleteness of rasa theory is evident in the *Shringara rasa* which reflects the male perspective, excluding the feelings, emotions and desires of women. The female character, such as that of Sita, Parvathi or Shakuntala, is viewed as *vibhava* or an object, incidental to rational knowledge. Reduced to a commodity both in literature and in critical paradigms, women are portrayed as passive sexual partners. Women's sexuality was seen as threatening the sacred concept of the family and the inheritance of lineage and property in the male line, critical aspects of patriarchy. Rasa theory, considered the basis of all aesthetics, is still taught uncritically in the academy and influences students' perceptions and public discourse.

A lively interchange followed, where it was pointed out that rasa theory should be seen in the context of the *Natya Shastra* as a whole, the exclusion of all non-Brahmanic art forms and the destruction of theatrical spaces. A narrow 'philosophisation' was sought to be put into practice. The 'grammar of performance' was not just codification and needed to be demythologised in the public sphere today.

Development activist, documentalist and writer **Shubha Chacko**, formerly with the National Law School of India University (NLSUI), Bangalore, talked of 'other ways of knowing'. She shared her experience of setting up and running an alternative documentation centre at NLSUI, which is typically comprised of upper class and caste faculty and students. In the era of the information revolution, when information was 'technologically fixed', there was both an overload of some kinds of information and a dearth of other kinds of information. For instance, rich case study material such as that presented by Rengalakshmi earlier was not easily available. Knowledge is commoditised and sold. The space of public libraries is being taken away by GATS (The General Agreement on Trade in Services, under WTO). State-run and funded knowledge, data bases, libraries have been eroded. The internet enables publishing and access to information. However, the internet organises information in ways that prioritise certain sites. How then can we have a 'people-oriented' information system? Certain notions of knowledge are inbuilt into the system. The documentation centre counters this by asking what knowledge is and who controls what knowledge is assumed to be, what passes for knowledge. It makes available information from 'smaller', micro sources. A

documentalist is not just a passive information keeper but an active agent of conscientisation. The challenge is how to maintain such an alternative space, with a central focus on issues of place, solidarity and social justice. This is political rather than apolitical work. The aim is to render the invisible visible, the silent noisy, and the motionless active. Such a space makes room for conversation, challenges hierarchies of knowledge and archives movements. It requires working self consciously with the mainstream library with other disciplines and streams, and brings into focus the dichotomy between so-called hard and soft subjects. In order to enter the curriculum one also has to understand the knowledge of the 'other'. The quest was a venture into the unknown.

Historian and author, **Dr. J. Devika** of the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvanthapuram, spoke about translating feminism into public discourse, sharing her experience from working in Malayalam in Kerala. She said a key feminist goal was to 'infiltrate public discourse' by providing new concepts that reconstruct reality: for instance, recognising that unwanted male attention is a form of violence against women, and that such behaviour should be termed 'sexual harassment', not 'eve-teasing'. The powerful act of re-naming could make feminism an enduring presence in public life. In Kerala, in the 1980s feminists drew their conceptual tools from the language of feminist theory available in English based on the universality of male domination. But translations of the term 'feminism' in Malayalam were inflected by the local context, feminism being an oppositional political project taking shape within the field of Kerala politics. Early attempts at translation emphasised socialist feminism. But the politics of sexuality grew stronger with the work of literary authors like Sara Joseph. The appearance of 'gender' in the popular discourse of development and decentralisation added a further complication. Gender is seen as non-divisive while feminism is seen as threatening because of its insistence on the pervasiveness of patriarchy. The liberal translation of gender reflects the influence of forces external to both scholarship and language. In hindsight, it was apparent that the problem was that languages are not used by all. 'There is no homolingual address' available to feminism. Reflecting on the translation of feminism into Malayalam, she identified two modes: faithful translation (characteristic of pedagogy) and non-faithful translation that does not recognise an original source but seizes the local context. The most popular translation of 'feminism' in Malayalam is *streevadam* (literally 'argument on behalf of women'). The political force of an idea sometimes required coining new terms. For example, the term she had introduced *garhika*

*adhvanam* (domestic labour) made a point that was not reflected in the simpler word *veettupani* (housework) that the Communists had used. There was need for more grounded translation and recognising heterolingual address in the task of creating feminist language.

The politics of feminist language and translation raised many questions and responses. Using the local language was seen as an ethical issue. Researchers were grappling with how to make the articulation of women's concerns (such as those related to health) meaningful, how to influence policy and public discourse. In the Mizo language, the word for woman was 'unworthy concubine'. The Bangalore Mizo Women's Association had introduced an alternative word that was not offensive but while they could use this in Bangalore, they would not be allowed to do so in Mizoram. Language and translation were also seen as being important in communicating to a younger generation. It was pointed out that non-faithful translation was subversive. Language created a platform, spaces that were central to agitational politics.

### **Issues and challenges in the struggle to transform the disciplines**

There were many resonances in the diverse experiences of research, interventions and activism that were shared, reflected upon and analysed in the course of two days. It was apparent that feminist perspectives have unpacked gender bias across several disciplines and forced a rethinking of certain concepts and methods. Yet, the core assumptions of most disciplines do not seem to have been influenced by the critical perspective of feminism. This is so across disciplines and perhaps especially so with regard to economic concepts of the 'rational man' and the bio-medical models of the science-based disciplines. Feminist ways of knowing are clearly political and seen as being subversive and destabilising. 'New' disciplines do provide alternative interdisciplinary ways of approaching problem areas. But the tensions between feminist research methodology and conventional methodologies have not been resolved. Alternative spaces for new kinds of research have been created outside the formal higher education system in India. Furthering a critical feminist perspective and creating alternative spaces within the academy, however, requires some degree of compromise. Feminism itself does not speak in one voice, the politics of language and 'difference' poses difficult conceptual and methodological challenges. The cooption and vocationalising of WS and its move away from academic activism has to be understood in the context of students' legitimate aspirations. Perhaps more progress has been made by

mobilising outside the academy than within it. The assertions of Dalit and Minority women provide some lessons in ways of reconfiguring knowledge and influencing public discourse. For Women's Studies/ Gender Studies the challenge is to retain the oppositional radical edge while negotiating for spaces at the levels of policy, research and education. The task is difficult because while there is considerable clarity of analysis in defining the problem (neti-neti), the way forward to the goal of gender justice is less clearly defined.

In a parable cited by Shuba Chacko, a woman wants a boat.

'... and you, why do you want a boat, if I may ask?' said the king...

*'To seek the unknown island'* replied the woman.

'What unknown island' replied the king, 'There are no unknown islands; they are all on the maps.'

*'Only the known islands are on the maps.'*

'And what is this unknown island that you are speaking of?'

*'If I could tell you that, it will not be unknown.'*

Like the woman in the story, we may intuitively and rationally be able to perceive the unmarked islands on our disciplinary maps. But there is no king who will provide us with the readymade boats. We have to construct the boats ourselves and row them out to sea.

~~~~~