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## Teaching and researching the geography of gender: a journey of negotiations and contestation

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This paper draws upon my teaching and research experiences for more than two decades in a premier university of India. I remember the day I joined the Centre for the Study of Regional Development in Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi most vividly, as if the event had taken place only yesterday. I had not anticipated the arduous and yet exciting journey I had embarked upon, particularly in terms of my academic engagement with teaching and researching gendered geographies. My colleagues had known about my work on gender prior to my joining the Centre and yet gender and geography were strange partners, making it rather difficult for them to see gender issues as even remotely geographical let alone as belonging to mainstream geography. I was often asked '*why do I want to be a poor sociologist rather than a good geographer*'.<sup>1</sup> In all earnestness, I was also advised to change my field to – hold your breath – biogeography. Things have changed since then, moving from resistance to acceptance, if not proactive encouragement, although I must acknowledge a few supportive colleagues. This narrative, therefore, is not only a personal journey, but also traces the trajectory of geography in general and that of the geography of gender as it is emerging in India in particular.

I attribute my interest in the geography of gender to my years as post-doctoral fellow in Syracuse University in the USA and to my supervisor, the late Prof. David Sopher, whose academic engagement with social disparities helped me pursue my own interest in socially (and economically) disadvantaged segments of Indian society. In my research that followed, I could see that the gendered position of women cut across almost all other categories of differentiation and there was a definite geography of gender emerging in the Indian social space. This was also the time when gender concerns in geography had started to take shape and there were concerted efforts, initiated largely by Prof. Janice Monk and her associates in America, to form the Gender and Geography Study Group within the International Geographic Union (IGU) to which I was subsequently invited to join. As far as I am concerned, my initiation into the geography of gender was because of one of those moments when I was in the right place at the right time. I must also state that in later years my joining Jawaharlal Nehru University, which is known for its liberal and multidisciplinary orientation and leftist ideology concerned with cutting edge issues of class and caste, has made it possible for me to continue with gendered analyses in an androcentric subject such as geography which could have been extremely difficult, if not impossible elsewhere in the country (Raju and Datta forthcoming).

And yet the key argument that runs through this essay is that my teaching of gender, both pedagogically and conceptually, remains interlinked with the legacy of the discipline of geography in India that I have inherited. Tensions remain as to what one can or cannot teach/research under the rubric of the geography of gender even as one is located in an ideologically progressive university. This is because the conservative boundaries between '*what is geography*' and '*what is not*' still require constant negotiating and reworking. Just to cite one example, I suggested to one of my Ph. D. students who wanted to do research on women in an export processing zone, a theoretical framework that would use patriarchy as an organizational principle in understanding labour market processes within a geographical framework, i.e., how private patriarchy gets shifted to public patriarchy as women move from home-based informal work to the formal labour market. I thought that such a framework would provide an exciting opportunity to address larger questions of negotiating private/public domains and the expansion of social space for such women. My student – academically brilliant (now in the Indian Foreign Service) – was hesitant as she was not sure if she would be able to defend her Ph. D. proposal in geography. She feared that others would come down heavily on her with the arguments that such a topic belongs

to sociology, women and patriarchy were essentially sociological constructs, and geography has nothing to do with such constructs!<sup>2</sup>

I think this and many more 'fear(s) of non-acceptance' raise two important issues: the intellectual traditions in which geography as a discipline arose and which continue in India, and the hegemonic production of (geographic) knowledge and the location of its proprietors. In the Indian context, certain types of studies have been viewed as more relevant than others: tribal, *dalit* (the historically socially and economically deprived 'untouchable' segments of population), poverty and unemployment versus gender identities, contestations and co-options etc.— the latter often associated with western preoccupation. Although such a construction may very well be interpreted as a postcolonial assertion that scholarship from the Anglo-Saxon or American-centred discourses does not have to be uncritically received by the so-called margins, it also means that intellectually politicized alliances create powerful 'centres' within the 'margins' in terms of those who decide that gender and identity questions are less important and less geographical than issues of poverty and underdevelopment. There is a near absence of organized activities/alliances of (women) geographers who could form pressure groups and collectively move the gendered agendas in geography forward as has happened in some of the countries in the West. In a nutshell, the critical mass of feminist geographers has yet to be formed.

Very briefly, Indian geography is still embedded in an historical tradition of empirical data gathering made largely possible because of extensive reports, gazetteers and a record keeping system of colonial origin, and the struggle to come out of the quantitative revolution and the resultant positivistic tradition is continuing. Data gathered are mostly on readily quantifiable attributes, perhaps because of the intellectual preconceptions of geography as an ideographic rather than a nomothetic discipline. Historically, physical, regional and social-cultural discourses have moved independent of each other, with the result that grounded realities were rarely seen as providing backdrop for human activities to unfold. Geographical concerns have remained largely androcentric. The most recent Model Curriculum in Geography proposed for adoption by universities in India still talks about 'Climate and *Man*' and the 'study of earth as the home of *man*' (page 27, emphasis added), while proposing specializations groups and thrust areas – the latter 'need[ing] urgent attention in the coming years (University Grants Commission 2001). I suggest that this language is not a simple matter of semantics, but is symptomatic of mindsets that continue to ignore/negate and undermine important developments in and around the discipline of geography elsewhere in the world.

In any case, many universities have not updated their courses, which remain so structured that there exists very few spaces for innovative ideas; most of the senior teachers are product of their times and hence resistant to the changing nature of contemporary geography. This vicious circle – an absence of a demand for geographers trained in social geography/gender reinforcing the already existing androcentric resistance, which in turn affects the job market – have contributed to the inordinately slower pace at which the geography of gender is moving in the Indian context.

There are comparatively few universities where geography is taught at the postgraduate level. Still fewer universities offer courses in social and cultural geographies – spaces which are potentially easier for gender concerns to be incorporated as part of existing courses in geography or in the introduction of gender and geography courses per se. Out of approximately 250 universities, only in 83 (one-third of the total) universities is geography being taught. Out of these 83 universities only 30 (slightly more than one-third of the total) universities provided the contents of their geography curriculum. A quick perusal of the contents reveals that only 11 universities have social and cultural geographies at the postgraduate level in their syllabus. Whether and how gender is incorporated into these courses cannot be commented upon for lack of the complete course outlines available to the author (University Grants Commission 2001), but it is quite likely that at the postgraduate levels also, the dominant ideas of what constitutes geography structure the curriculum, leaving very little scope for gender issues.

Although at one level I do belong to the so-called 'privileged few' who do move 'in-and-out' of contested boundaries, in the sense of getting exposed to knowledge produced elsewhere, my discourses remain limited by my southern location whereby certain

information/scholarship is more readily available to me than the other. However, it was only when I started researching and teaching gender that I realized how my situatedness in a southern middle class milieu and growing up amidst day-to-day realities of caste/tribal, class, rural and urban struggles has equipped me to engage in nuanced, complex and multilayered discourses on gender. I also realized that gendered discourses are mediated through inescapable economic, social and political institutions both for women and men. In a way, these real life complexities informed my teaching and research.<sup>3</sup>

In the absence of much scope to embark upon gender issues directly, I use available spaces in development, and demographic studies to bring forth the centrality of gendered locations in deprivation and marginality issues. I do this within the framework often termed as the women in geography (WIG) paradigm, i.e., seeking to give geography of gender a place within existing academic structures, to move progressively to gender and geography (GAG), i.e., confronting and seeking to transform gender-blind theories and analyses in an incrementally pragmatic way. In retrospect, this has been as much a strategy as my conviction that this was the way in which geography of gender needed to be handled in the Indian context. Thus, much of my teaching and researching on gender has been a constant struggle to be critically aware that women and men are not undifferentiated monolithic categories and that even as gendered construction continues to remain the central analytical category, such a construction has to be socio-spatially contextualized. Positing issues as intertwined with multiple locations also helped in making discussions and teaching about gender more acceptable to my students with differing ideologies. Also, most women students in my university come from better socioeconomic and urban backgrounds because of the admission policy, which is weighted heavily towards academic merit, and because geography as a social science subject is less preferred by male students (as opposed to engineering, medicine, commerce and so on) who are essentially from rural backgrounds. As such, for women students, gendered subordination and other deprivation issues were not confronted directly, at least not at the outset. Situating gender in larger framework works well in such environment.

In addition, my journey also includes steady and rigorous research about the geography of gender within the issues of caste/class deprivation (and in doing so using/creating spaces for discussion on gender) and presenting this material in courses on Indian development and social geography, never letting go off the spatial embeddedness of social relations and social formations and gender within them as contra hegemonic and geographical analyses. I do not know how important it is and perhaps it is too trivial a point to include here, but I need to point out that producing research that is without any doubt can be placed in the domain of geographic knowledge, such as *An Atlas of Women and Men in India* (Raju *et. al.* 1999), was a timely and extremely helpful event as far as acceptability at the home turf is concerned.

Despite such incrementally pragmatic moves, larger issues such as how does one counter and overcome resistance to feminist analyses in academia remain as scholars confront such challenges almost everywhere. Despite various measures, there are no easy ways to carve out feminist spaces. Academic environments can be traditional and conservative with very little or no scope for innovative ideas or they may be liberal and forthcoming, and yet the academic power structures may be such that some research is seen as more significant and relevant than the other, as discussed earlier. Academia cannot be completely free from biases of the world at large where gendered power relations are so deeply entrenched, hegemonic and institutionalized that they appear non-negotiable. I would like to suggest that under such circumstances and in the absence of a critical mass, I have used available frames of reference to pursue my teaching and research interests in the geography of gender. Once appropriated, such spaces may increasingly be used and new spaces can be created for more direct inclusion of gender<sup>4</sup>, notwithstanding the fact that too radical an approach may still not work, i.e., gay, lesbian and queer studies are unlikely to emerge in immediate geographical teaching and research in India.

Finally, although the atlas and some of my other research with an explicit geographical focus has consciously aimed at countering the doubts about the relevance of gender in geography (particularly at home), I am also trying through my broader research to establish that research is good or bad, but there is no such construct as *a poor sociologist and a good geographer*, and I think I am succeeding!

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<sup>1</sup> The notion that 'doing women' is sociology is contingent upon the construct of geography as a 'spatial science', a point that is somewhat elaborated later in the paper. It may be pointed out that other disciplines also face constraints in defining and expanding boundaries (see, Deshpande 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Is it a problematic issue whether geography is not sociology? I think pedagogically it is an issue because geographers with their expertise in understanding of space and spatiality have a definite edge over other social sciences in contextualizing gender. In the specific context of patriarchy, it has been argued that patriarchy is not a monolithic construct and enacts differently in different locations (Raju 2001).

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that the feminist research elsewhere is increasingly becoming responsive to such complex frameworks only recently.

<sup>4</sup> I have very recently introduced a M. Phil course on 'Gender and Development' in addition to an earlier course entitled 'Regional Dimension of Female Labour Force in India'.