

# Histories from the borderlands

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THE intellectual beginnings of this essay can be found in an autobiographical account of my engagement with feminism and sociology as a student, a lecturer and an activist.

As a sociologist located in a UGC sponsored Women's Studies Centre, seeking to include/incorporate/integrate feminism in sociology, one found oneself on the margins, along with those who experienced the academy as an alien terrain. In academic life, women's studies organisationally exist as a semi-separate space, only in relation to ideas and research and not in relation to any convincing inter-disciplinarity. One thus travels between women's studies, the zone of exclusion, which allows greater expression of feminist ideas and practices, and the zones of inclusion within sociology, in relation to which one stands as an outsider.

Location as a feminist (outsider) in the academy gives one a vantage point that binds epistemology and ontology such that all knowledge (even the insiders') emerges as located, grounded and limited. What follows is an account of some of the contemporary practices of Indian sociology as perceived from one such location on the margins.

At the end of the 20th century, sociology, like most other social sciences, faced an impasse. Globalizing tendencies on one hand, and the resurgence of the Hindutva brigade in the last two decades on the other, have made the presence of sociologies from the margins more critical to the forging of political agendas and public policies. The number of women, dalit and bahujan students in the social sciences has registered a sharp increase, in many ways bringing a renewed vitality to the margins.

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The increased scope and pace of social transformations, the spectre of privatisation of higher education, and the furious race for shrinking resources are rendering the margins more vulnerable to challenges within and without the university. In such contexts, the concentration of research facilities in a few 'national' centres of excellence or a greater guarding of disciplinary boundaries and retreat behind seemingly protective disciplinary barriers is often sought to be legitimised as a way out of disciplinary crisis.

However, a heightened sensitivity to disciplinary histories need not necessarily mean increased sensitivity to the margins. In times of crisis, issues of institutional and intellectual marginality may in fact be pushed under the carpet of university formats and pragmatic constraints. An intellectual past of first generation sociologists whose works defied discursive boundaries, and an institutional past of being a 'residual category' discipline<sup>1</sup> may not guarantee sustained dialogues with the margins.

**H**owever, there have been, across generations of practitioners, sustained debates on the development, institutionalisation and indigenisation of the discipline. More recently, there have been inquiries into the 'crisis' in the discipline, on the constitution of the disciplinary field and its core, and on practical aspects of curriculum development and pedagogies<sup>2</sup>. These guarantee a commitment to self-reflexivity and dialogue

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<sup>1</sup> D.N. Dhanagare, *Indian Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, Jaipur, Rawat, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., T.K.N. Unnithan et al., *For a Sociology of India*, New Delhi, Prentice Hall, 1965; R. Mukherjee, *Sociology of Indian Sociology*, Bombay, Allied, 1980; T.K. Oommen and P.N. Mukherjee (eds.), *Indian Sociology: Reflections and Introspections*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1986; D.N. Dhanagare, *Themes and Perspectives*; and N.K. Singhi (ed.), *Theory and Ideology in Indian Sociology*, Jaipur, Rawat, 1996. Also relevant are: P. Uberoi, 'Some Reflections on Teaching the Sociology of Gender', *Samyashakti* 4 & 5, 1989-90 and 'Reciprocity in Social Science: Gender Issues', *Indian Journal of Social Science* 6(3), 1993, pp. 243-58; M. Thapan, 'Sociology in India: A View from Within', *Economic and Political Weekly* 26(19), 11 May 1991, pp. 1229-34; S. Hedge, 'On Sociology in/of India: Towards a Discursive Deviation', *Social Scientist* 17(5-6), 1989, pp. 93-108; V. Das, 'Sociological Research in India: The State of Crisis', *Economic and Political Weekly* 28(23), 1993, pp. 1159-61; A. Beteille, 'Sociology and Common

across borders. The present inquiry locates itself in this tradition of self-reflexivity, while positioning itself on the site of 'borderlands'<sup>3</sup>.

**A**cademic borderlands are the territories that lie between the academy and activism, sociology and gender studies, metropolitanism and regionalism, disciplinary boundaries and identities and interdisciplinary capacities. The 'borderlands' are themselves no doubt a contested zone, co-inhabited as they are by people of different castes, classes, languages, ethnicities, sexualities and politics. More importantly, in the academy, these socially contested borderlands are epistemological borderlands constituting the interface between different claims to knowledge.

Many of us who came to sociology in the late 1980s via university departments outside the metropolitan centres found little trace of the feminist and dalit student radicalism associated with these social movements. The curriculum could be best described as apolitical, distanced from history, with courses neatly packaged into dichotomies of structure and change, modernity and tradition, rural and urban. The setting up of women's studies centres by the UGC in the borderlands of established departments in the social sciences, opened the possibilities of contesting these dichotomies and of doing politically engaged and personally relevant sociologies. It is important to note that the residual character of sociology and the absence of discursive unity has made it a space for Marxist, dalit and feminist scholars to intervene.

**F**or the feminists in these newly constituted academic borderlands, the institutions and their practices were most obviously masculinist – in two closely related senses. Both the founders, the knowledge-makers, were predominantly male; also only that which was scientific and rational was defined as knowledge. The feminists were, therefore, ontologically 'strangers'<sup>4</sup>, functioning as 'marginal intellectuals'<sup>5</sup> in the academy. There was much intellectual excitement as feminist critiques of the discipline challenged the absence and distortion of women's experiences in sociological knowledge. The history of the discipline was read more as a sociology of absences, constituting thereby a 'sociology of lack of knowledge.'

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It was a period marked by the labelling and denouncing of the mainstream as 'malestream' and, at the institutional level, by a mushrooming of courses on 'women and society' in departments of sociology. It seemed as if sociology had opened its boundaries to processes and developments beyond the discipline initiated by the women's movement. Some on the borderlands even anticipated a feminist revolution.

Yet, as is apparent today, not only is a feminist revolution missing in sociology<sup>66</sup>, but also that sociology has seen far less transformation in conceptual frameworks than other disciplines. The disciplinary assumptions

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Sense', *Economic and Political Weekly* 31(35-37), September 1996, pp. 2361-65; S. Deshpande, 'Crisis in Sociology: A Tired Discipline', *Economic and Political Weekly* 29(10), 5 March 1994, pp. 575-76; A. Giri, 'Creating a Community of Discourse in Sociology in India', *Economic and Political Weekly* 28(29-30), 17-24 July 1993, pp. 1538-39; G.B.V. Murthy, 'Crisis in Sociological Research', *Economic and Political Weekly* 28(45), 6 November 1993; and S. Rege, 'If this is Tuesday – it must be Social Roles: Sociology and the Challenge of Gender Studies', *Economic and Political Weekly* 29(19) 7 May 1994, pp. 1155-56.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of 'Borderlands' derives from Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *La frontera*, and from the notion of *Gavkusa Baheril* (outside the margins of the village, the settlement of the dalits) as it appears in the autobiographies of dalit writers. *La frontera* and *Gavkusa Baheril* are literal borders that create people whose everyday ontological condition is one of liminality (see *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> See G. Simmel, 'The Sociological Significance of the Stranger', in R. Park and E.W. Burgess (eds.), *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1921.

<sup>5</sup> K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, London, Routledge, 1936.

<sup>6</sup> J. Stacey and B. Thorne, 'The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology', *Social Problems* 32, 1985, pp. 301-16.

and boundaries have not been as deeply questioned and reworked in sociology as, for instance, they have been in history, english or economics<sup>7</sup>.

**T**he central importance accorded to the study of family, marriage and kinship meant that women were not invisible in sociology the way they were in history or economics. Such a presence of women in the disciplinary core has given sociology the label of a 'soft' and 'general' discipline and, to that extent, there has been relatively less resistance to women practitioners in the field. Most women practitioners have sought to contest the discrimination in the profession, though very few have been concerned with the sexism of the discipline; even fewer see feminist sociology as a way of doing radical sociology. Consequently, there has been little transformation in the overarching brahmanical conceptualisations of caste in the academy.

As a feminist on the borderlands, one finds that the selective incorporation of feminist ideas has come at the cost of assimilation and, more importantly, less dialogue across boundaries. The feminist challenge is as if locked into a framework of 'successor science' versus 'sociological revenge'. The feminist borderlands have themselves come under sharp scrutiny as the unified notions of female subordination have come to be challenged. Feminist critics of sociology find themselves turning to the discipline with a new-found sense of belonging. The mission is still to explore, from the margins, what sociology can be and should not be, but with a more discerning sensitivity to the history of the discipline.

On the borderlands this means that several things need to be done. The varying conceptions of woman/feminism in the biographies of professional organisations, journals, academic departments, curricular and pedagogic practices need to be mapped, and the biographies of women and feminist practitioners and their careers need to be structuralised.

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**T**his essay limits itself to a review of changing conceptions in a professional journal, viz. *Sociological Bulletin*, the official journal of the Indian Sociological Society. To that extent, it gives a partial picture of contemporary disciplinary practices<sup>8</sup>. Obviously, it is not a complete history, for no one journal can be the sole indicator. Nonetheless, a map of the conceptual and theoretical paradigms helps tease out the dialectical relationships between sociological conceptions and historical and social processes. Omissions, issues that were not debated or debated elsewhere, also provide important clues.

**N**one of the articles that appeared in the *Sociological Bulletin* (SB) during the period 1952-70 were thematically concerned with women. Most obviously one begins to trace the presence of women in the area of marriage and family. In the first decade after the inception of the journal in 1952, there were interesting presences of women in writings on 'the return of bourgeois family in socialist Russia' (Vol. 2, March 1953), polyandry in Malabar (Vol. 7, March 1958), role of women in the family in early Christianity (Vol. 13, September 1964). Most of the writings on the family were concerned with the transition from 'institutional' to 'companionship' marriage, the changes in sex roles, and the impact of female education on familial interpersonal relations (Vol. 4, September 1955; Vol. 9, March 1960; Vol. 7, March 1958).

It is important to note that in all the opinion surveys on attitudinal changes towards the family, the samples appeared to be male. Categories such as 'graduate teachers' and 'students' were classified by class and caste

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<sup>7</sup> Mary John, 'The Encounter of Sociology and Women's Studies: Questions from the Border.' Paper presented at a national seminar on 'Recasting Indian Sociology: The Changing Contours of the Discipline', JNU, 20-21 March 1997.

<sup>8</sup> A UGC minor project to review woman/feminism in the *Sociological Bulletin* (the official journal of the Indian Sociological Society), *Samajshastra Samshodhan Patrika* (the official publication of the regional Marathi Samajshastra Parishad), as also in the biographies of women and feminist practitioners, sociology syllabi and pedagogical practices in universities in Maharashtra is presently under way at the Women's Studies Centre, University of Pune. The present essay, however, is largely based on a review of issues of *Sociological Bulletin* in the period 1952-1996.

but treated as gender-neutral (Vol. 4, September 1955; Vol. 9, 1961). Checklists in these surveys reiterated gender stereotypes such as ‘women do not adjust, there is bickering amongst them’ (Vol. 5, 1955, p. 170). There were two articles on matrimonial advertisements (Vol. 14, March, 1965 and Vol. 15, March 1966) which highlighted ‘personal appearance’ and ‘efficiency in domestic chores’ as ranking high on a list of expectations from brides.

While one expected the presence of women in articles in the area of marriage and family, what came as a surprise was the presence of women in articles on urbanisation and urban social problems. In assessing the social effects of urbanisation on industrial workers, women migrants were treated as a specific category (Vol. 6, March 1957). The studies on urban ecology (Vol. 9, March 1960), traced the relations between the social character of the ecological area and the age/sex structure. In studying urban social problems (Vol. 8, March 1959), especially beggary and prostitution, the stereotypes about ‘female vices and immoral practices’ were reiterated (Vol. 9, September 1960).

But there was a near complete absence of women in articles on community development programmes (Vol. 7, September 1958). Studies on knowledge of political personages in villages were based on all male samples (Vol. 10, September 1961). A similar invisibility of women could be noted in articles on caste/class patterns, social mobility, and in the increasing number of articles on panchayat raj and trade unions in the post-1965 period.

**T**he ‘voices of women’ could be heard most in opinion surveys on fertility and family planning (Vol. 10, September 1961; Vol. 12, September 1963). A sociological analysis of the family planning programme (Vol. 15, September 1966) was explicitly done from a woman’s perspective and drew conclusions that feminists were to later highlight in the early eighties. It argued that women were reduced to unpaid workers, handmaids and bedfellows. Women’s opinions on sexual satisfaction and their inability to refuse their husbands were noted as serious factors to reckon with if the family planning programme were to succeed. There was also a note of protest against women being held solely responsible for family planning.

In the first decade not more than five women life members of the Indian Sociological Society were listed, but by 1970 at least 20 more had joined. Most women contributors (a total of about 10) in the period (1952-1970) wrote mainly on fertility, marriage, divorce and changes in familial relationships. Sunanda Patwardhan and Parvathamma, however, contributed in the ‘male’ domain of studies on about landholding patterns and power relations and caste in crisis.

**T**he presidential addresses of the period, save the address by K.M. Kapadia at the Rajasthan Sociological Conference (where the issue of social change was addressed via an inquiry into the impact of the Widow Remarriage Act, 1956), were silent on women. However, none were overtly sexist in language and content. The panels at the All India Sociological Conferences (AISC) held in 1967, 1968, and 1969 reiterated the same story.

The presidential addresses in the 1970s were primarily concerned with issues of modernisation, development and planning (1970, 1971), the intellectual traditions in Indian sociology (1976) and the sociologist’s quest for a better society (1978). The addresses and the panels at the conferences outlined the role of the sociologist – as an observer, analyst, or interventionist. There were debates on Marxian methods as value loaded (1970), on the sociology of social movements (1976) and on whether the sociologist’s participation in social movements made him/her more integrated (1978). Most addresses were ‘outward looking’ and in some ways took note of political happenings and the social movements of the period.

The publication of the Report of the Committee on Status of Women in India (1975), and the resurgence of the second wave in the women’s movement in India were, however, missing, even as passing references. The report of the CSWI was listed in the books received but not reviewed in the pages of the journal.

A panel on ‘Changing Status of Women in India: Policies and Problems’ was organised by Tara Patel, probably for the first time in the history of the All India Sociological Conference. It focused on the invisibility

of rural and working class women in sociological research and the decreasing political participation of women in the post-independence period. There was some discussion on how the 'non militant' Indian women performed dual roles in contrast to their western counterparts. Popular cinema was held responsible for giving a setback to the liberation of women in India (1978).

**T**he debate on a sociology of sociologists in India (Vol. 27, September 1978), concluded that sociology was an overwhelmingly male profession. Interestingly, the long list of professional research areas made no reference to sociology of women, feminism or even 'status of women'. Nevertheless, despite being an overwhelmingly male profession, women have been office-bearers of the Indian Sociological Society and have served as editorial advisors of the Bulletin since 1975.

A thematic review of the articles published in the Sociological Bulletin in the 1970s showed sustained interest in issues of social class and educational-occupational aspirations. Agrarian relations and electoral processes emerged as new areas of concern, though research in many of these areas became overtly sexist. In one study on social class and occupational prestige in India (Vol. 21, March 1972), the sample was reduced from 2091 to 1908 as female heads of house-holds and those who gave inadequate information were excluded. A study on caste, class and sex variations in social distance among college students, found girls to be more 'liberal in their attitudes', but 'idiosyncrasy' was stated as an explanatory factor! (Vol. 24, September 1975). In research on the electoral process, the only reference to women was in the form of 'dislike of Indira Gandhi' in the region under study because of her being a woman and a widow (Vol. 20, September 1971).

**S**ocial movements and theoretical frameworks to study them became a major area of concern in this decade (Vol. 26, March 77) with the peasant and dalit movements included along with the earlier interests in reform and religious movements. Only one passing reference to women's movements was, however, found in this volume on social movements, and that too as an example of how party-based activities may be misconceived as national movements. During this period articles on marriage and family marked a sharp decrease (there were only three). Women became relatively more invisible in the pages of the Bulletin as compared to the 1950s and 1960s, especially as the analyses of social movements and political processes outnumbered those of the family.

In the post 1975 period, there were some references to sex role being a result of socialisation (Vol. 28, March and September 1979) and to processes of women's decision making in the family (Vol. 26, September 1977). Though it was claimed that the most conspicuous social change in Indian society was in the area of status of women (Vol. 25, March 1976), there were no takers for studying this conspicuous change. The impact of feminism and early women's studies in India was best seen in two articles of the period. While one underlined female participation in farm work (Vol. 25, September 1976), the other highlighted women's membership in a women's club as family status production work (Vol. 24, September 1980).

**N**evertheless, the decade was significant for the increased sensitivity to the history of the discipline, its teaching and research programmes. There was more discussion on ideology and social sciences, involvement and detachment of social scientists, radical sociologies, and even some critiques of the divorcing of human experience from knowledge. The ground was being prepared for integrating knowledge, experience and politics.

The growth towards interpretative and reflexive sociological knowledge continued in the 1980s. There were pleas for contextualisation, discussions on phenomenological sociology and reflexive reviews of paradigms and discourses. This opening up to the social construction of knowledge was accompanied by a flood of studies from a Marxist perspective, especially on agrarian structures in India. While neither of the above mentioned trends showed any direct influence of feminism or feminist studies, by contesting the positivist abstract 'objectivity' they made way for feminist analyses of the social construction of knowledge.

The 1980s were marked by a combination of studies that gave visibility to women as well as those that posed paradigmatic challenges. It is interesting to note that while the former were dispersed across several volumes, the conceptual and epistemological challenges appeared as an exception in a single volume. If you miss this volume, you miss the voices of the feminist revolution in the discipline!

The impact of feminist research and the proliferation of women's studies were developments seen in several articles of the period. One directly addressed the limitations of the survey method and highlighted the importance of everyday lived contexts to understand the conflicts in women's working and occupational lives (Vol. 33, March/September 1984). A more direct challenge to the dominant paradigms was posed in a critique of the biologicistic assumptions of the structural-functionalist approach to explaining the inequalities between the sexes. A case was made for setting aside male-centred categories in Marxist analysis for a more 'gender sensitive' frame of socialist feminism (Vol. 36, March 1987).

'Gender' as a theoretical category came to be employed, probably for the first time, in the study of change in family structures (Vol. 37, March, September 1988) and in drawing up of a profile of women as actual agricultural producers. The relationship between the segregation and seclusion of women and the invisibility of their work came to be underlined. Life histories and statistical profiles were combined to underline the processes of permeation of gender ideology in societal perception of women's education, sharply challenging the assumed link between education and modernisation in case of women (Vol. 39, March-September 1990).

**E**qually underlined was the failure of conventional approaches to social stratification to explain gender differences in education and occupational attainment, advancing a case for a feminist-materialist approach to interrogating the education system as a mediator of caste, class and gender inequalities. The dangers of 'cultural relevance' in education in a gender-based society were delineated by teasing out the gender relativism in educational policies and practices (Vol. 39 March-September 1990). The books reviewed in the issues of the Bulletin of this period included at least five works by feminist scholars; also the workshops conducted before and after the World Congress of Sociology had specific panels on 'women' issues: wife-battering, women's struggles and gender as a basis of social stratification (Vol. 35, September 1986).

**I**n his inaugural speech at the XI World Congress of Sociology, M.N. Srinivas underlined the significance of women's studies in highlighting the androcentric bias in the social sciences. Significantly, he viewed women's studies as one more trend in Indian sociology, among other trends that sought to comprehend Indian society from the point of view of the oppressed. The working paper for a panel on 'Gender and Society' organised at the XXth AISC underlined the ways in which gender perspectives could reorganise and reconstitute sociological discourse<sup>9</sup>. This was a significant development in that it was probably the first time that the feminist challenge to received theoretical and epistemological notions was put so directly.

However, the abstracts of the 43 listed papers in the panel reflected the carryover of an obsession with roles and role conflict, and a series of confusions emerged from the rather loose use of the concepts of sex and gender. By this time, courses on 'women and society' had made their appearance in the postgraduate sociology syllabi. However, the conceptual confusions in the abstracts suggest that the increasing visibility of 'women' had not meant any significant reworking of sociological discourse.

The last decade (1990-96) witnessed a greater presence of feminist scholarship in the journal. Matriliney (Vol. 42, March-September 1993), nude worship (Vol. 41, March-September 1992), political patriliney (Vol. 43, March 1994), and the social history of the Age of Consent Bill (Vol. 45, March 1996) were discussed. The larger part of the discursive space was occupied by dalit movements, dalit resistance (Vol. 45, September 1996), social mobility, and ethnicity (Vol. 41, March-September 1992). Gender as an analytical category was usually missing in these, the exceptions being two of the three articles on the social impact of the new economic policy (Vol. 44, March 1995).

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<sup>9</sup> Sujata Patel, 'Gender and Society: Contemporary Theoretical Challenges'. Working Paper, XX AISC, Mangalore, 1993.

**D**iscussions on feminist pedagogies and the sociology of emancipation, conceptual issues in theorising patriarchy, feminist social theories and women's narratives of pain were all packed into a single issue (Vol. 44, September 1995). In his Presidential Address at the XXIIth AISC, Yogendra Singh highlighted the importance of gender sociology as a form of doing 'activist sociology'.

Yet, there seems to have been little organisational initiative to develop the sub-field in a manner that would establish 'gender' as a category of analysis just as crucial as caste and class. If anything, the questions of 'class or caste', 'class or gender' and more recently 'caste or gender', were debated more outside the pages of the Sociological Bulletin. The debates on 'status of women in India', the women's movement in India, violence against women, work inside and outside the home, and the structures of patriarchy remained significant omissions.

More questions than conclusions emerge from this review of the articles published in the Sociological Bulletin (1952-1996), the presidential addresses of the AISC, and reports of the AISC conferences. Sexism was apparent in the formulation of the research questions, in the methods used, the data collected and interpretations made. Nevertheless, dominant assumptions within the disciplines started being challenged from 1975 and the possibilities and potential of interpretative, politically engaged, radical sociologies came to be discussed. That this created a ground for feminist interventions is reflected in the absence of any direct refutations or backlash to feminist scholarship.

**T**he impact of these interventions has been most marked in substantive sociology (family, education), with empirical work on questions raised by the women's movement, but the conceptual framework and dominant paradigms have continued relatively unchanged. 'Women' as subject matter were never completely absent in the sociological discourse of the Bulletin, since in the important sub-fields of family and demography, for instance, they could not be ignored. However, sociologists of politics, religion, formal organisations, and social movements virtually ignored women. For those working in quantitative research traditions, gender (understood as division between men and women) has been easily included as one more variable. The feminist scholarship and theorisation on gender has been included as one more kind of scholarship.

Overall, the impact of feminism or other engaged sociologies like Marxist sociology on the discipline (at least as it appears in the Sociological Bulletin) has been negligible. The 'origins' of the sociological study of gender in sociological studies of family and marriage (largely within a functionalist frame) have left an imprint in terms of basic conceptualisations and assumptions. The conceptualisations invariably fall into a frame of 'sex roles', and there is a lasting assumption that 'gender' operates primarily in the private sphere. This had a very depoliticising effect for all those striving towards a feminist sociology. (As someone put it, 'Imagine talking of "class roles" or "caste roles" and you'll know how depoliticising "roles" have been!')

In feminist scholarship, it has been customary to speak of 'paradigm replacements'. It is assumed that feminist interventions would gradually move from making women visible to documentation of inequality, conceptualising gender as social structure, and finally to a stage of conceptualisation of the complex matrices of gender and other structural inequalities. As is apparent from the pages of the Bulletin, such a 'stages approach' is much too neat to be real. The varieties of assimilations and co-options have meant the loss of an erstwhile oppositional epistemological frame and a weakening of the voices on the borderlands. Organised and organisational efforts, research committees, and pressure groups within professional bodies are needed to tackle these issues, and more.

The tensions and dialogues between the 'many worlds' of women/gender in sociology suggest that several dichotomies need to be addressed. History and sociology, regionalism and metropolitanism, the intellectual and institutional, appear as dichotomies in institutional practices, as do objectivism and subjectivism and brahmanical and non-brahmanical perspectives in the disciplinary core. Without these, reflexive reconstructions of theoretical frameworks, conceptual systems and epistemological positions are likely to be postponed. As also the feminist revolution in sociology and probably a feminist presidential address at the AISC!