Institutional Alliance between Sociology and Gender Studies

Story of the Crocodile and Monkey

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If the alliance between sociology and gender studies is not to settle into a 'tiredness' and 'relation of convenience', pedagogies that explicitly interrogate the divisions of public and private, reason and emotion, rooted in both, the everyday and history are crucial. Such pedagogies can have the kind of subversive impact on the academy which the alliance between sociology and women's studies was expected to have had on the structures and processes of the academy.

MOST sociologists, today, would agree that the alliance between sociology and gender studies has been mutually beneficial and academically enriching. Yet, the alliance between the two at the levels of the institutional, curricular and pedagogic tells a different story. A story akin to that of the crocodile and the monkey of the Panchotantra fame. The crocodile's eyes, tired with routine, come to rest upon an 'active', 'much in news' monkey, perched atop a 'jamun' tree. Befriending the monkey, seems to the crocodile, an easy way out of tiredness. He promises the monkey rides on his stable back into the clear waters. The monkey is relieved - a stable back and access to the wide and deep waters seemed like a good deal. Like all alliances, this one too had its institutional boundaries and the monkey's perennially ticking heart and activity began to be an irritant to the well established institutional structures and processes. "Why not swallow up the monkey's heart and then allow her to ride my back?" the crocodile wondered as he sought a solution to the irritant. He asked the monkey to hand over her heart to him, but the monkey, well aware of the rules of the jungle, feigned innocence and replied 'I am sorry but I do not carry my heart on me - I keep it safe in the trunk of the jamun tree'. Those of us actively engaged in protests and campaigns of the women's movement and working in UGC sponsored women's studies centres, attached to social science departments, learn to mourn these lines of the monkey - as we struggle, on one hand to avoid 'ghettoisation' of women's studies in the academy and on the other hand its professionalisation and esoteric academisation.

In the mid-1980s, for many of us studying sociology in universities in Maharashatra, the setting up of women's studies centres and cells by sociologists or in departments of sociology, had marked our introduction to feminist literature and the women's movements, thereby opening up possibilities of doing politically engaged social science. As women's studies centres came to be established within universities, some practitioners preferred 'a politics of autonomy of women's studies', while some of us saw the 'recasting of our respective disciplines from gender-sensitive perspectives' as our immediate politics. The much discussed issue of integration vs autonomy of women's studies, often overlooks the fact that the dualism is a false dichotomy [Roseneil 1995]. As feminist researchers and teachers, working in universities, we are required to move across the boundaries of our own discipline and women's studies since most of us teach, both mainstream compulsory courses and the relatively autonomous optional courses in women's studies. Drawing upon the theoretical tools of both, contributions are sought to be made to both - one's discipline and to women's studies. No doubt, this traversing of boundaries in part, arises out of a pragmatism since there are still not many teaching or research positions in women's studies. But we cannot overlook the fact that many of us choose this location of 'two homes' [Roseneil 1995] or 'the outsider within' [Hill-Collins 1991] or 'the heart on the tree' because as Maricica Westcott (1990) has argued, the personal struggle of being both an insider and an outsider is not only a source of knowledge and insight but also a source of self-criticism.

In many ways the interventions of feminists, their critiques of content, method and epistemology of mainstream sociology are crucial and analogous to that of Marxism in an earlier period [Porter 1995]. For many of us, trained in 'objective', 'value-neutral sociology', we discovered the radical roots of sociology via its feminist critiques. As Porter (1995) comments, the founding fathers had brought to the discipline a passion and commitment which emerged from their involvement with the world in which they lived. The alliance between the 'tired' discipline of sociology [Deshpande 1994] and women's studies had the potential of reviving the passion and engagement. Yet by the 1990s the alliance, now consolidated into courses on 'women and society' and 'sociology of women', has come to be characterised by routine and tiredness. This paper is a story about all this and more - narrated in three seemingly disjunct parts. Section I of the story, draws upon the growing concern about the 'crisis in sociological research and teaching' [Das 1993; Murthy 1993; Deshpande 1994; Giri 1993, Betelle 1996], and then describes and locates the 'tiredness' of the discipline, especially as it is reflected in curricula and pedagogics, Section II begins with the entry of the monkey from its 'movement' orientated life on the tree, onto the back of the crocodile. It reviews the alliance, at the level of the everyday practices, both institutional and academic. Section III draws upon the experiences of the faculty members and students of the department of sociology at the SNDT Women's University, Mumbai. Since 1992, there had been concerted efforts in this department to overcome the 'tiredness' in the life of the crocodile and to transform the alliance of convenience between the crocodile and the monkey into a meaningful relationship.

I

The Crisis of Tiredness

The sociological community in India has been concerned with the 'state of crisis in sociological research' in India. Das (1993) commenting on this state has drawn attention to the fact that the number of students registered in doctoral programmes is on the increase while ignorance of elementary facts and concepts is on the increase. Standard format PhDs serve as tickets to teaching positions and get published too. Betelle (1996) has highlighted the acute pedagogical problems in university departments of sociology; especially that of integrating the teaching of sociological theory with sociology of India. Several ways of dealing with the crisis have been outlined. G B Venkatesh Murthy (1993) has argued for training workshops for teachers and for putting a stop to the cycle of reciprocity that displaces academic standards. Giri (1993) argues that what we need is a community of discourse rather than a few centres of excellence for research. Deshpande (1994) has underlined the 'collective ineffectiveness' of the sociological community; its lack of response to the primarily social issues of the 1980s; secessionism, communalism and casteism. The 'tiredness' of the discipline is thus established.

Reviewing historically, the 'tiredness' of sociology in universities and colleges in Maharashatra, it is clear that the period following the formation of the state of Maharashatra was marked by what D K...
In such a context, practice-oriented critical science is required to engage in a search for thinking both outside and inside the academy. In Maharashtra, the saffronisation in the universities of Pune, Kolhapur and Marathwada. The expansion of the service centres and towns in the sugar belt. The socio-economic scene in Maharashtra is marked by a high rate of urbanisation and rise in service sector; the service sector accounts for 46.5 percent of the state domestic product [Palshikar 1997]. This has obviously seen a rapid mushrooming of colleges imparting professional and semi-professional degrees. There has been a sharp rise in the number of management schools both in urban centres and towns in the sugar belt. The emergence of 'K G to P G' education for commerce in the curriculum while for the convent educated, middle class student the brahmanical rendering of Indian society is further embedded.

At most of the university departments of sociology, 'English' is officially the language of instruction; while students may be allowed to write the examinations in Marathi. At the undergraduate level, sociology is taught both in English and Marathi. More than 60 percent of the students in the postgraduate departments have no comprehension skills in English and largely depend on the undergraduate textbooks or/and are unable to follow the lectures and debates in the classroom. A comparative review of the reading material available in English and Marathi underlines the institutionalised inequalities and their reproduction in systems of higher education. Regional professional bodies such as the Marathi Samajshastra Pari shad have made strong arguments in favour of cultivating sociology in the regional language. Yet what we have seen so far are mainly attempts at translation of paperback textbooks or attempts to make sociology 'relevant' by demonstrating sociological knowledge to be problem-solving. The more nationally and internationally recognised sociologists have reacted to this by stressing 'academic purity' through an esoteric discourse. Both kinds of attempts, one to prove sociology as problem-solving and the other to imbibe a high culture of sociology - are defence mechanisms in which critical reasoning and action take a backseat. The issue is not simply one of making available reading materials in Marathi; but one that touches upon the conception of the relationship between sociology and history. It requires that immediate attention be paid towards establishing a dialogue between regional social histories and theoretical perspectives in sociology. To conclude, the crisis of tiredness is underlined in sociology curricula that have little relevance sociopolitically and personally, and by routinised pedagogies, the kind that are best described.
as If it is Tuesday, it must be Social Roles' [Baker and Rau 1990].

Since the 1980s, gender-sensitive critiques of social sciences have generated critical impulses and self-reflexivity. The feminist critiques of sociology have destabilised mainstream thinking in sociology. Publications and courses on 'women' and 'gender' have multiplied, and yet very little of all this gets translated into our curriculum and pedagogical practices. Has the heart been swallowed up - making the alliance superficial by limiting it to scholarly debates? Enter, the monkey and the story moves on to the second part.

II

The Crocodile, the Monkey and the Heart on the Tree

The late 1970s had seen an expansion of the women's movement in India, both in terms of the number of action groups and the issues taken up by them. In Maharashtra, the department of sociology at the SNDT Women's University responded by initiating courses on 'women and society'. By the late 1980s, the UGC guidelines on women's studies saw social science departments (such as the sociology department at Pune University) which had been granted women's studies centres, design courses on 'sociology of women' as optional courses at the MA level. This period was marked by intense intellectual and political stimulation, and by establishment of important linkages between the theory of knowledge and the struggles and strategies of the women's movement. There was an increasing visibility to 'gender' on the agenda of the state and obviously several compulsions and benefits came to be attached to including 'women' or 'feminism' in the curriculum. Sometimes courses on 'sociology of women' and 'women and society' had been designed in anticipation of the UGC centres that were to be granted; and many of us working in women's studies centres that had been planted onto departments where such courses had already been designed and floated, found our fate here.

Importantly, it underlines the importance of 'lived experience' and this may be misconceived as 'commonsensical'. In our classrooms, therefore, we often have to make a beginning by interrogating lived experience and 'inherited understanding' simultaneously. One of the exercises that we have found useful begins with a listing of our 'sociologically inherited understanding of the woman question'. For instance.

Women enjoyed a high place in Indian society in ancient India, but with advent of Islam, women's status became lower (Class XII, prescribed textbook).

In a modern family, the woman is not the devotee but equal partner. She can divorce her husband (First year senior college, prescribed textbook).

This inheritance is then juxtaposed with students' personal experiences on the same issues; what we have therefore are the learnt and lived experiences of men and women of different castes and communities. All this is then juxtaposed with passages on the related issues from the non-brahman tradition in Maharashtra. For instance a reading of the divorce notices given in the vernacular non-brahman newspapers of the 1920s by lower and middle caste women [quoted in Omvedt 1973]; extracts of Tarabai Shinde's Street Parush Tulana (1882) at once reveals the project of hindutva (homogenisation) and brahmanism (in name of objectivity) and a middle class bias that underlies our curriculum and understanding of status of women.

Juxtaposing extracts from social history with lived experiences leads to an interrogation of the social construction of the 'self and location in historical time and space. The exercise is not only exciting and engaging but is also empowering as it allows the participants in the course to find gaps and spaces in otherwise structured courses. Importantly, it underlines the importance of retrieving the non-brahman conception of society; for such a sociology, gender is not a new 'add on' category but a structurally integral one, since to Phule, equality and destruction of caste hierarchy could not be achieved without bringing equality to the social groups most oppressed by the system; and his first practical social reform efforts were for woman and untouchables [Omvedt 1976]. It may therefore be argued that engaged pedagogies are crucial to the integration of gender perspectives in the curriculum. What happens then when those hostile to the
Subjectivity underlining gender perspectives, or even those who see it as just another element in the canon, deal with these courses? In such cases, does then the mainstreaming of gender perspectives mean the loss of their radical potential? There is a new urgency to these questions since compulsions to include courses on women in the curriculum are many. The project of mainstreaming cannot be given up and replaced by a complete autonomy for women's studies. This would amount to an abandoning of the project of creation of more adequate knowledge. A policy decision at the UGC level is required in order to make a shift from token inclusion of 'women' and 'feminism' at orientation and refresher courses. Summer institutes and orientation courses orienting teachers to the integration of gender perspectives in the curriculum at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels are required.

Refresher courses in women studies are presently being offered at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. However, there is considerable ambiguity and confusion about the 'status' granted to these courses. College teachers complained that these courses were not considered equivalent to taking a refresher course in one's discipline, and since attendance at these courses is linked to promotions and pay-scales they were not willing to take the risk. In several universities, courses on gender have been introduced at the undergraduate level in the restructured sociology curriculum. Many of the college teachers complained that teaching these courses without any orientation workshops to provide guidelines was a difficult task.

Akshara, A women's documentation and resource centre in Mumbai has been conducting orientation workshops with these college teachers. As resource persons on this project, we had been assigned the orientation on the topic 'ideology of sexuality'. In the first round of discussions, it emerged that a majority among the teachers had dealt with this topic in terms of the inherited paradigm of 'social problems'. They had highlighted the 'increasing problem' of prostitution and homosexuality. A sizeable number confessed that they had just ignored the topic since 'sexuality' was not something that could be dealt with in large, mixed, undergraduate classrooms. During the orientation workshop, ways of introducing the topic in the classrooms through passages from regional social historical materials such as magazines dedicated to the 'scientific study' of sexuality in early 20th century Maharashtra or through matrimonial advertisements were discussed. Through those materials, participants could be convinced of how the units on 'family' work, class and caste were all related to the ideology of sexuality. The need for such orientation workshops, focusing on pedagogical practices that may be employed in sociology of gender classrooms is crucial and immediate; since 'mass marketable' textbooks catering to these newly introduced courses on women are already multiplying.

If the alliance between sociology and gender studies is not to settle into a 'tiredness' and 'relation of convenience', pedagogies that explicitly interrogate the divisions of public and private, reason and emotion, rooted in both the everyday and history are crucial. Such pedagogies can have the kind of subversive impact on the academy, which the alliance between sociology and women's studies was expected to have had on the structures and processes of the academy.

At the department of sociology, at the University of Poona, Samwaad, an action group committed to gender politics has emerged as an offshoot of such pedagogical practices. Initially, the group was an extension of classroom discussions; but soon began to actively take up issues on campus. Following series of meetings with women's groups in Pune, the group became active in larger campaigns such as the support for Bhanwari Devi campaign and the anti-beauty pageant campaigns. Classroom learning was translated into posters, songs and street-plays. Over a period of two years, a campaign seeking to reach out to students in mofussil areas emerged. This campaign entitled 'Nirbhay Bano Abhiyaan' explicitly addressed the issues of economic liberalisation, violence and religious fundamentalism. The membership of this action group may not always fully coincide with the group doing the course on 'sociology of women'. As Radhika Chopra (1996) has argued, for many students doing such courses, the engagement could be of a reflective kind.

For some this engagement does not end with the course. What is significant is that there is an 'engagement' and it is not one of 'politics out there' [Chopra 1996] but one that informs everyday lives and relationships. The emergence of such action groups from the classrooms does transform considerably the texture of the everyday at university departments. Questions like 'Are we into academics or activism?' 'Does a woman do sociology?' are raised at heated faculty meetings. While these questions assure us that dichotomies are being interrogated and boundaries traversed, the institutional matrices of examinations, academic bodies and UGC policies often prove the contrary.

There have been endless debates on whether women's studies' person can technically be allowed to teach courses on 'sociology of women'. The debates have had to be referred to academic councils. The fact that the UGC policy on women's studies calls for a periodic evaluation of the centre, somehow makes these centres seem 'illegitimate', as if the claim to the university must be proved. This often makes the alliance between sociology and women's studies an unequal one. Though on paper, interdisciplinary teaching and research have been launched, the strength of the organised apparatus to shield separate disciplines has not been undermined [Wallerstein 1991]. Examination papers may be set and evaluated by committees - the members of which, have not the slightest acquaintance with gender perspectives. (Question papers on these courses are often based on a commonsensical misunderstanding and misconception about the women's movement and feminism in India.) This often means that students have to pragmatically switch back to the 'inherited' commonsensical understanding of 'the status of women'.

The UGC policy on women's studies keeps fluctuating. While earlier a path of mixed development, i.e., combining autonomous women's studies centres with centres integrated with disciplines had been followed, a recent UGC guideline has made 'autonomy' a precondition for the continued existence of centres. The logic being that such centres would be truly interdisciplinary and would be able to intervene across different departments and disciplines. For many of us, pursuing a politics of integration, this has meant a premature calling off of the alliance. For the monkey there is no crocodile's back to ride on - no access to deep waters. It could mean wearing one's heart on oneself but having only a 'ghetto' to express it in. For the crocodile, the monkey moves away, leaving the radical potential of Integration of gender perspectives' prematurely thwarted.

III

Transforming the Alliance

From Convenience to Relevance

This last part of the story is about the restructuring of the curriculum, examination and evaluation practices at the department of sociology at the SNDT Women's University, Mumbai. This project which stretched over a period of five years, came to be viewed as a model by many of us in western India. The restructuring of the curriculum was informed by a perspective that seeks to link knowledge systems and societal transformations. The focus thus was on training the student to interrogate power and the hierarchies in society. The course on 'gender and society' was conceived as a pivot, since it was a major site for the exploration of one's own location and engagement in power and hierarchy. Designed as a seminar course, it was meant to be training in developing a gender perspective which was to be integrated in the reading of other courses. A radical restructuring of courses and established institutional practices had required intense lobbying with the members of the board of studies, experts and committees. Sujata Patel who initiated this project in 1991 and carried it through for over five years, comments that the restructuring has been possible mainly due to an overall respect for authority at SNDT and absence of
The academic councils, the faculties, the board of studies and boards of university teaching overlap and often papers keep moving. As the bodies meet rarely the matters arc kept pending for months and years. The new Maharashtra Universities Act of 1993 has nothing for this archaic management of academics - rather the number of statutory bodies and committees have increased and the act stipulates that they need not meet more than four times a year. The act makes no provisions for three issues requiring urgent attention: the separation of academics from the government of the day, administrative restructuring and timing of profit driven private colleges [Deshpande 1993]. Though right legislation cannot set right the 'triedness', nevertheless it is crucial to projects that seek to eventually transform, through the transformation of their curriculum, the universities themselves. As feminist sociologists, this means once again claiming the university as a site for our activism. As Wallerstein (1997) has commented, 'We have spent the last 200 years trying to unite the search for truth and the search for goodness. Social science as it came to be established in the 19th century, was precisely the heir to both searches...rather than reunifying them, it has itself been torn apart by the dissonance between the two searches' [Wallerstein 1997:7]. A sociology in quest for a just society which seeks to integrate the two cultures [Wallerstein 1997] will necessarily have to have a meaningful academic and institutional alliance with gender studies. Gender studies committed to a just society will have to grapple with the complexities of the caste, class, communal, and global constitution of gender. In such a quest; an institutional alliance with sociology shall be mutually beneficial.

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References


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