

## Book Review

# Women's studies in India: More than a cell in a beehive

The book is as much an account of the discipline of women's studies as it is of social changes and political conflicts in contemporary India.

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[Krishna Menon](#)



The veteran politician and union leader Mrinal Gore addressing a women's rally against rising prices in the 1970s. Women were strengthened by the landmark Towards Equality report published in 1974, and this period, the editors write, was marked by a massive mobilisation of women against custodial rape, violence, and the exclusionary nature of development. | Photo Credit: keshavgoretrust.org/

Panchali Ray and Shadab Bano have brought together scholars of women's and gender studies from diverse institutional settings and generations to reflect upon the journey of a "young" discipline in India: women's studies. The book is as much an account of the discipline as it is of social changes and political conflicts in contemporary India. The essays establish crucial linkages between epistemology, pedagogy, and the structures of higher education, on the one hand, and the contested nature of social and political life outside academia, on the other hand.

*Teaching/Writing Resistance: Women's Studies in Contemporary Times*

→ Edited by Panchali Ray and Shadab Bano

**Orient BlackSwan, 2024**

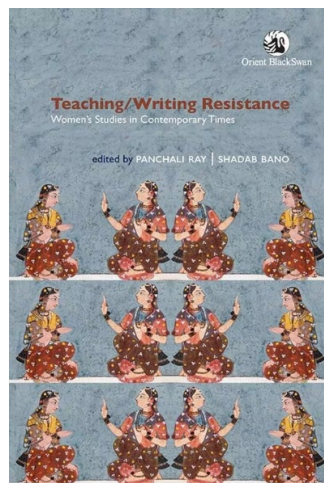
**Price: Rs.1,260**

The book has an excellent introduction followed by the three distinct thematic sections with a total of eight chapters. In the introductory chapter, the editors lament the lost radical potential of the discipline and the movement that birthed it owing to a complex set of reasons, including the institutionalisation of women's studies within the university. In her contribution to this volume, Rajlaxmi Ghosh reminds the reader of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who famously wrote that women's studies risks becoming just "another cell in the university beehive".

However, all is not lost, and the book has some essays that inspire with their accounts of how women's studies is faring in non-metropolitan settings. Other essays call for a revisioning of the nature of the discipline itself by acknowledging its inbuilt contradictions and inconsistencies. The essays highlight the various ways in which the critical and transformative nature of feminist knowledge is challenged, diminished, and tamed by the rigid institutional setting of the university system, which is itself beset with myriad problems.

Ray and Bano's introductory chapter is a breezy account of the history of women's studies in India that begins with the socialist promises of Nehruvian India that co-opted privileged and vocal women. This was followed by an increasing disenchantment with the Indian state and the re-emergence of the "women's question" in the 1970s. Women were strengthened by the landmark Towards Equality report published in 1974, and this period, the editors write, was marked by a massive mobilisation of women against custodial rape, violence, and the exclusionary nature of development.

Thus, with renewed energy the women's movement and, almost simultaneously, women's studies took off on a remarkable journey that resulted in new research, exciting scholarship, and the growth of women's studies centres as mandated by the University Grants Commission (UGC). From just 4 such centres in the 1970s, the number had risen to more than 150 by 2019. However, as many of the essays in this book point out, the story does not have a typical happy ending.



This book will find an abiding place in women's studies classrooms and scholarly debates. The carefully curated essays and elegant cover depicting Amara Shataka are a welcome addition to the scholarship on the discipline. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

The introductory chapter discusses the challenges facing women's studies in India, which is undoubtedly a contested field. The writers identify many factors such as the attack from conservative political forces that dismiss the vocabulary and concerns of women's studies as an aspect of Western epistemological hegemony. Equally strong are the pressures from an economic agenda that prioritises the professionalisation of women's studies to suit the development agenda of transnational think tanks. This message is reinforced by the primary funding agency of the women's studies centre, the UGC. The focus has shifted thus from questioning power and patriarchy to "gender mainstreaming and empowerment" as reflected aptly by the current Union Finance Minister when she asked dismissively: "What's patriarchy, ya!!" (She was interacting with students of a private university in Bengaluru.) The purpose of the women's studies centres today seems to be the creation of "good citizens" who will partner the state in its women's empowerment work and the discouragement of "difficult daughters" who question the structures of power in Indian society. This undermines the foundational critical quest of women's studies.

Theoretically, the big challenge for women's studies comes from the intense interrogation of the category "woman", prompting the question, who is the subject of feminism? and, by extension, do women's studies have any relevance? The toughest questions typically are being asked from within the discipline, and this book is an excellent example of that. The editors identify the current moment as critical to the histories of the women's studies centres in India. On the one hand, the contributions and insights of feminist epistemology have begun to get consolidated and the discipline itself is engaged in a serious self-assessment, and on the other, it is facing an onslaught from the market, the state, and powerful political forces.

And yet, the fact is that women's studies classrooms are, as Mary John writes in her essay, increasingly places of intense interrogation from a heterogeneous student body characterised by gender, caste, language, regional, and other overlapping and criss-crossing hierarchies. The book does an effective job of reflecting these turbulent times in the life of a young discipline that refuses to be disciplined by the state, the market, or the university.

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The book's first section, titled "Disciplining Gender/Gendering Disciplines: Reflections on Possibilities", carries two essays that help the reader make crucial connections between the history of women's studies and contemporary challenges.

This section starts with a discussion by the respected activist and scholar Devaki Jain, who dwells on the early years of the discipline when women's studies was thought of as the academic arm of the women's movement. It sought an interventionist role emboldened by the new knowledge that was being created, seeking relevance by participating in the process of development and social change rather than confining itself to academia. The tensions created by the proximity with the state and the need to acknowledge "difference" while talking about women are some of the challenges that she ends her chapter with.

The next chapter, authored by Mary John, examines the ways in which the caste question has impacted both the pedagogy and the epistemology within women's studies classrooms. She writes that although these classrooms have become more diverse (thanks to expanded caste quotas), they are yet to address this change largely because of the "caste blind" nature of the history of social reform and women's movements.

The second section of the book is titled "Women's studies and its Institutionalization" and tackles the various ways in which scholars and students negotiate the biases within the university system and the overall politics of knowledge production.

U. Vindhya's essay examines students' attitudes towards the curriculum of women's studies that she describes as "soft" or lacking in academic rigour. She wonders whether this stems from the discomfort that feminist scholarship creates by challenging some fundamental social institutions and practices such as family, marriage, motherhood, and caste. This essay focusses on the pedagogy within women's studies classrooms, the prospects of employment, and the profile of students who enrol in women's studies programmes.

Vindhya concludes the chapter by reminding the reader of the original interventionist role envisaged for the discipline and its transformative agenda. The author needs to be applauded for reiterating with clarity and conviction that the original aim of women's studies was the reconstruction of knowledge

and of society. Instead, today there is considerable pressure on women's studies centres to "produce" professionals to work with the state and execute its "women's empowerment schemes".

Arpita Anand's chapter addresses the issue of institutionalisation of women's studies and its impact on the meaning and nature of interdisciplinarity. Nithila Kanagasabai's chapter is a fascinating exploration of the ways in which the feminist project is translated through women's studies departments in non-metropolitan locations, with a special focus on Tamil Nadu. The author acknowledges the dilution of the subversive potential of women's studies as a result of institutionalisation and the depoliticisation and professionalisation that follows. And yet, it is an account with a hopeful twist as the author discusses the various ways in which students and teachers join academic networks and activist groups and transform themselves as well as the disciplinary boundaries and practices of women's studies.

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The last section of the book, consisting of three chapters, examines the "Ruptures and Repetitions" in women's studies. Sunera Thobani presents a considered account of the ways in which women's studies dominated by white feminism in the West failed the discipline and the movement by overlooking the intersectional ways in which power operates, while also dangerously aligning with the state to further its own agenda. This has resulted in, for instance, certain sections of white feminists gendering Islamophobia by reinforcing simplistic binaries between the "secular, liberal west" vs the "misogynist-oppressive Islamic world".

Chapter 7, authored by Panchali Ray, asks the question that in a way holds this book together: what is the future of women's studies given the theoretical instability of the category "woman"? She advocates a future for women's studies centres that will help them move away from this identity-based foundation of the discipline.

In the concluding chapter, Rajlaxmi Ghosh argues against any fixed agenda for women's studies. This, she says, will help women's studies retain its aporetic character, brimming with irresolvable internal contradictions and innumerable possibilities.

There is room for hope and optimism—although at times the book seems to despair—provided scholars and students who are associated with women's studies see the discipline as an ally of the many burgeoning efforts to reassert citizens' right to participate as equals in the political and development process.

This will help create an epistemology based on solidarities that will not see the assertion of caste, gender, language, and disability identities as oppositional to the category of the category "women" in women's studies but as interlinked. Thus, the epistemology and pedagogy of the women's studies classrooms animated by such solidarities would remain the transformative and critical spaces that they set out to be.

This book will find an abiding place in women's studies classrooms and scholarly debates. The carefully curated essays and elegant cover depicting Amaru Shataka are a welcome addition to the scholarship on the discipline and are also a record of the political struggles of our times.