

Interrogating The Activist-Academic Divide

J. Devika

THINKING GENDER, DOING GENDER: FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP AND PRACTICE TODAY

Edited by Uma Chakravarti

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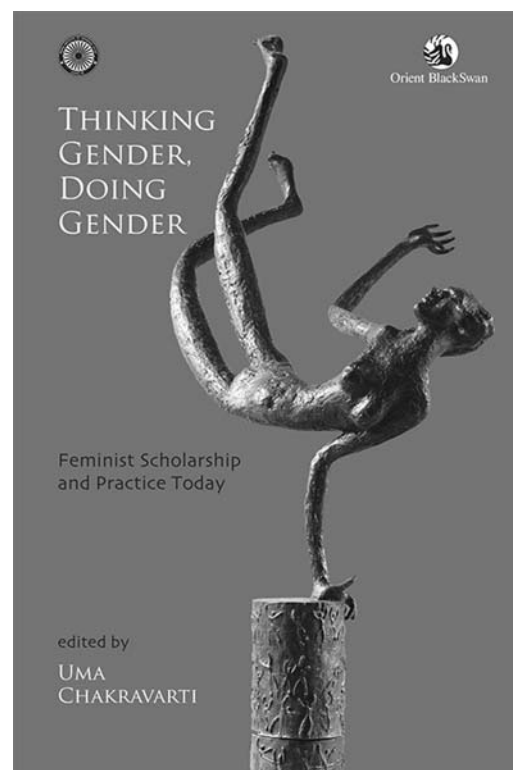
This timely collection of essays is in equal measure a product of and a detailed comment on an important moment in the history of feminism in India, in which feminists reject the need for a unified subject of feminism, and turn towards a deeper interrogation of the activist/academic divide in making sense of feminism itself. It contains excellent essays that reveal the extent to which feminism in India has become alive to the intertwining of many different strands of power shaping of our patriarchies. The editor in her introduction remarks that the essays in the volume are about ‘doing’ gender rather than just ‘thinking’ it, but many of these essays show that feminism in India has often complicated that divide—it is not always just thinking, they seem to say. Rather, it was often the effort to develop a praxis in the fullest sense.

The collection is divided into three sections—on feminist pedagogies, on feminist interventions in history, and feminist understandings of, and interventions in, culture. Uma Chakravarti in her editorial introduction points out that these are themes articulated by a later generation of feminists in India, but it appears to me that what is really new is not the set of themes, but the manner in which they have been raised and discussed. Older themes have been reexamined in the light of the emergent awareness of the complexity of Indian patriarchies, which demands that we take into consideration the confluence of contingent and emergent axes of power that produce immediate forms of masculinism and misogyny. Also, in the best of these essays, feminist teachers, researchers, theatre people, and activists reflect on their own praxis in the light of contemporary challenges. Not all the essays included are in this refreshing mode even though each of them offers thoughtful analysis—some are in the more familiar mode of feminist critique of patriarchal institutions or practice and does not always draw upon activist experience or self-reflexive reflection on fieldwork.

Many of the former strike an immediate chord with feminist intellectuals and educators who live and work away from India’s academic metropolises. All the essays in Part

1 are striking in this way. Sharmila Rege’s essay on the possibilities of the Phule-Ambedkarite pedagogy for raising critical knowledge about Indian patriarchies in classrooms is an excellent example. She calls forth her own experience of devising and implementing such teaching practices to argue for the vital importance of the language question in the effort to create empowering classroom situations in the regional context. At the same time, she warns against assuming the validity of homolingual address—which may obscure the elitism of ‘high-culture’ versions of regional languages. Kumkum Roy addresses similar questions from a metropolitan university context which has sought to acknowledge student diversity through an appropriate admission policy. The third essay is by a group of activist-researchers with considerable experience in critiquing and trying to intervene in school education for long. This essay too highlights the wealth of their experience and struggles to challenge the biases of textbooks tied to the project of patriarchal nation-building. Chayanika Shah offers a wonderful personal account of her experience of the struggle between patriarchal science and feminist ethics, the re-entry of the body into the feminist political imagination beyond heteronormative binaries, and its implications for transforming feminist activism.

The second part of the book is also about thinking/doing gender from a feminist perspective in two ways: first, as effort to remedy the silence about women in conventional historical archives through collecting oral sources, and secondly, as the attempt to compile historical memory as relevant to feminists as a collective. All three essays in this section make it clear that feminists no longer delve into history in search of either a pure and fully-shared past, or seek ‘uncontaminated’ women’s voices from earlier times. Indeed, as V. Geetha puts it at the end of her insightful essay on her engagement with Tamil history with a group of others, their mode of retrieval ‘also meant acknowledging that feminist politics has not only to do with feminist, but that it can also be names and identified in other spaces and forms’ (p. 161). The concern with redoing the idea of the



feminist collective without romanticizing it is a valuable aspect of Geetha’s essay in these times when the concern with intersectional power threatens to postpone it indefinitely. She suggests that narratives from history that suggested a more expansive politics, ‘one that allowed for a complex understanding and simultaneous challenging of class, gender and caste inequities’ may allow us to meet the challenges of our own times better (p.159).

The essays in the third section are diverse and held together by the notion of ‘culture’, rather tenuously. They are on literature, art, commercial aesthetics, cinema, the institution of the *jogti*, theatre, and the experience of space. Of these A. Mangai’s essay that traces her own work as a theatre practitioner from the 1980s speaks actively with V. Geetha’s reflections; Vani Subramanian’s essay recalls eloquently many different ways in which women and feminists have sought to make creative and political use of space. Many of the other essays are interlinked by a common thread of time—the post-Independence decades, especially the 1950s. These include Shubra Nagalia’s essay on Krishna Sobti’s *Mitro Marjani*, V. Shantaram’s film *Teen Batti Char Raaste*, and commercial advertisements in the Tamil press by Anandhi S. The last two also provide valuable insights into the interplay between regional and national patriarchies. The rest of this section too is very interesting reading which provokes critical reflection. Nevertheless, this section, except for a few essays, seems to lack the feisty determination evident in the others, to take the activist/academic binary head on, and to reflect on femi-

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nist praxis explicitly. The themes also appear too diverse to be pulled together by a rather over-extended notion of ‘culture’. It would have perhaps been more productive to have yet another section on feminist politics itself, where Anagha Tambe’s essay on *jogtis* and the debate on prostitution/sexwork in India could have been put in conversation with say, a sex worker activist’s reflections on doing feminism. Taking intersectionality as a tool to re-examine critically the long-standing themes of feminism in India would require that we do so—for it is clear that persons who identify themselves as sex workers do not share the same intersections of power as the activists or scholars who write in favour of or opposing their positions, and it is necessary to acknowledge their dignity by listening to their voices.

Overall this little volume is an excellent window into the concerns, dilemmas, and challenges of contemporary feminist praxis in India.

J. Devika is at the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram.