

Feminist challenges to sociology in India: An essay in disciplinary history

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This article suggests that paradigmatic changes took place in sociological traditions in India from the late 1970s to the 1990s in a manner similar to the catalytic changes occurring in the same period in different sociological traditions across the globe. In the case of sociology in India, it was feminist questionings of the systems of family, caste, religion and other tradition–modern dualities that introduced key re-conceptualisations. The article suggests that feminist studies posed theoretical and methodological challenges at four levels: first, these theories have argued that institutional and non-institutional forms of power flow through all forms of economic, social and cultural relationships; second, given that in India these inequities were organised during the colonial period, they assert that a historical and an interdisciplinary approach is imperative for the study of the ‘social’; third, these positions outlined a theory of intersection that explored the way economic and cultural inequalities and exclusions were organically connected; and lastly, they suggest a need to complicate the concepts of agency and experience, given that actors/agents can, and do, represent both dominant and subaltern positions in their life cycles. The article contends that the feminist interrogations unsettled the received sociological paradigm on sociology of India in significant ways, creating new possibilities for more eclectic and parallel paradigms to emerge.

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I

Introduction

Historians of the discipline of sociology have argued that the 1970s should be considered a critical juncture in comprehending the reflexive turn

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that has taken place in the discipline of sociology. Gouldner (1970) had placed the final closure on the self-acknowledged position of American sociologists that their work defined the discipline and its organisation into various sub-disciplines.¹ This *fin de siècle* allowed the gaze of the discipline's practitioners to revert to France and Germany where the study of this discipline had been initiated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and where a contemporary efflorescence of new intellectual ideas was making a major mark (see Joas and Knobl 2009: Introduction). The development of structuralist perspective in France revolutionised the substantive and epistemological grounding of social sciences and established an organic interface between linguistics, semiotics and anthropology/sociology. These ideas found novel resonance in the work of Michel Foucault who used them to interrogate the relationship between modernity, social sciences and power.² In Germany, a renewed conversation with the ideas of Max Weber and George Simmel, together with an engaged dialogue with the early work of the relocated Frankfurt school (Held 1980; Jay 1973) and articulated in the work of Habermas (1987) and Offe (1996), provided a new language to understand and assert modernity's revolutionary and emancipatory role (in contrast to poststructuralism and postmodernism), creating the conditions for the re-framing of critical social theory.

By the 1980s, it was obvious to the new generation of sociologists that there was little to gain by discussing sociology as a study of a *sui generis*

¹ As Steinmetz and Chae noted: '... the central claim in the book's title—that sociology was entering a period of crisis—captured a sense of disorientation in American sociology that has never really abated since 1970, when *The Coming Crisis* was first published' (2002: 112).

² Foucault's work displaced a Weberian understanding of modernity as an age of relentless rationalisation and bureaucratisation outside of its historicity. Instead he argued that:

[T]he relations between pairs like madness and reason or power and freedom constitute the very problematic of modernity itself. Assuming either a rational freedom purified of mad power or a rational power at root identical with a mad freedom is precisely what would be the most difficult thing for us moderns to do. (h)e was concerned to describe the precise historical shapes assumed in their specific instantiations. Foucault described various powers, but not power itself; he traced the shape of modern rationalities, but not the structure of universal reason itself; freedoms and madresses, not Freedom, not Madness. As such, Foucault simply could not have been interested in liberating invariant experiences of madness or freedom from their repression by unwavering rationality or power. What Foucault always insisted upon, rather, was that our problem today consists in bringing these reciprocal yet incompatible aspects of modernity into more explicit tension with one another (Koopman 2010: 551).

system of society (see Giddens 1990: chapter 1). Rather it was argued that sociology should now be presented as a specific intellectual project emerging out of the processes of modernisation put in place in Europe and was re-imagined to be a study of the negativities and discontinuities that organised modernity's emergence and consolidation. This redefinition was critical because it allowed contemporary sociologists to initially question the perspectives and the overall oeuvre of the European thinkers (called 'classical' sociologists) who, it was thought, had originally defined the discipline's conceptual frame, orientation and research questions.³ This questioning led them to re-look at some thinkers and their theories, such as George Simmel and Norbert Elias, together with the early debates of the Frankfurt School⁴ and re-frame perspectives regarding modernity, modernisation and its relationship with sociology. This new conceptual architecture accepted the fact that there were many differences in pre-modern structures within Europe (Wittrock 2000) and thus there may be similar differences across the world and, by implication, in the various projects of modernity emerging across the world.⁵ Much more significant to the present theme being discussed in this volume are the issues that began to define sociology's substantive analysis and here we can identify two themes. First, an analysis of environmental and economic risks conducive to late modernity led theorists to focus on heightened insecurities and dangers experienced by individuals in everyday life (Beck 1992). Some suggested that this latter process manifested itself in forming liquid identities,⁶ thereby promoting transient, unstable and fluctuating projects of agency. Second, the instrumental use of science and technology together with the militarisation of the state and legitimation

³ On the problems of canons and the contemporary (non)relevance of the 'classical' thinkers in sociology, see Lemert (1995) and Turner (1996). For example, Ritzer and Smart suggest that

...developments within social thought, in particular the construction of postmodern, feminist and multicultural perspectives, have rendered the very activity of defining key figures and perspectives to be found in the field as problematic, as representing something like the constitution of a canon, itself a potentially reprehensible act (2001: 1).

⁴ See Held (1980) and Jay (1973) for a discussion on the early writings of the Frankfurt school.

⁵ Shmuel Eisenstadt's theory of multiple modernities was part of the new developments in the field (Eisenstadt 2000).

⁶ For Bauman, liquid modernity '...is the growing conviction that change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainly *the only* certainty' (2012: viii, emphases in original).

of new forms of surveillance has led many to argue in favour of increasing control and domination over citizens. This trend, sometimes termed 'governmentality' and 'biopolitics', has enhanced, according to some, the increasing use and legitimation of violence over citizens by the state and between citizens and across nation states (Bauman 1989; Giddens 1990). These theorisations were associated with two further developments, one of which can be characterised as methodological. This led to epistemological and philosophical questions of sociology's practices such as: how best to study humans; do we need evidence from all aspects of society to understand social life and is sociology inherently interdisciplinary; what counts as evidence; are social science arguments of the same weight and validity as that of natural sciences; how does one marry methodologically, the particular with the universal; what is explanation; what is the relationship of science with normative and moral queries.

The other development can be named as critical and praxiological which asked: how does social science help to transform society and provide a good life; what is good life and what values can be considered good; what is the relationship between theory, politics and ethics; how can theory be connected to practice; are theories merely partial assessments and is modernity a partial realisation of human emancipation. These questions combined the empirical queries with a critique of philosophical assumptions governing sociology, directing the latter to query not only substantive issues of how to understand and comprehend the positivities and negativities of European modernity⁷ but also urging theorists towards epistemological and ontological questions (Delanty 1999; Giddens 1994). And given that there was no consensus on these positions, sociology increasingly came to be seen as a field postulating plural and eclectic positions⁸ and its theoretical specialisation, now re-named 'social theory', as distinct from its earlier avatar—sociological theory—was given a specific role to debate these problems. Henceforth, social theory was conceived to be an assessment of how and what modernity is, the analysis of its origin and its impact on the world, but it was also a deliberation of the 'philosophical and logical questions' of the practice of theory and how these relate to the

⁷ Such as emancipation on one hand or alienation and disenchantment on the other.

⁸ For instance, Giddens suggests, '(o)ne significant consequence of the change and fluctuations to which social theory has been exposed has been the identification of a proliferation of perspectives or the recognition of the existence of "diversity of theoretical standpoints"' (quoted in Ritzer and Smart 2001: 4).

‘betterment of humankind’ (Giddens 1994: 1; see also Delanty 1999; Ritzer and Smart 2001).

In this article, I wish to analyse the changes⁹ that took place in the field of sociology in India in the late 1970s and particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. It is my contention that the discipline of sociology in India has gone through catalytic changes in these decades, in a fashion similar (but not same) to the narrative given above in the case of North America and Europe (Patel 2011b). I suggest that in India, the feminist interrogation of the analysis¹⁰ of the domains associated till then with the sociology of family, caste and religion has played a critical and important role in redefining the field. Prior to this interrogation, sociology in India conceived itself as investigating the structures and institutions of family, caste and religion which it defined as being ‘traditions’ and saw itself studying the changes occurring in them as a consequence of the introduction of modernity.¹¹ My argument is that feminist studies¹² in the guise of women’s studies¹³ presented a theory of modernity (some scholars have called it colonial modernity¹⁴), thereby displacing the existing perspective regarding

⁹ Veena Das (1993) initiated a discussion on the ‘crisis’ in Indian sociology in early 1990s in the pages of *Economic and Political Weekly*. However, her critical stance was not focused on the problems within the traditions of sociological thinking in India. Rather, her comments were related to institutional issues regarding higher education and professionalism of the discipline together with the nature of pedagogic practices. That the crisis has something to do with the nature of sociological traditions in India is an issue which is addressed much later (Patel 2011a), although some initial interventions in this debate, such as made by Deshpande (1994) and later by Rege (1997), had already signalled this trend. Rege’s (1997) intervention also discusses the impact of a non-innovative alliance between the fields of sociology and feminist/women’s studies on their identities. For an overview on this discussion in the context of changes taking place in the discipline, see Patel (2006, 2010a).

¹⁰ For a different perspective on this relationship, see John (2001).

¹¹ See Srinivas (1966) as an example of this approach, popularly known as *structure and change* approach. No wonder the five volumes *Festschrift* for M.N. Srinivas is titled as such (see Shah et al. 1966).

¹² This article focuses on Marxist–feminist studies (Patel 1993).

¹³ The nomenclature used by early feminists in India of the knowledge system that assessed women’s discrimination was women’s studies. Today the market is burgeoning with texts and readers on women’s studies, such as John (2008).

¹⁴ Colonial modernity is used as a discursive term/concept, that is, it is not only about modernity experienced in the colony or in the period of colonialism but it is the way ideas, ideologies and knowledge systems were organised to refract and invisibilise the ‘modern’ contours of everyday experience of the people as non-modern.

tradition–modernity in India.¹⁵ By establishing *gender* (Geetha 2012) as a category and linking it to the theory of patriarchy,¹⁶ it made visible the dominant class and caste orientation of the Indian project of modernity and argued that modernity was not value neutral,¹⁷ suggesting thus a need not only to interrogate the conceptualisation of ‘traditions’, that is, the representations of institutions such as family, caste and religion, but also to develop a critical language to examine these. Feminists argued that these ‘traditions’ were invented and not inherited from the past, rather they were contemporary in nature and character and had been articulated and organised during the colonial period by both the colonial state, in and through legal interventions, and the nationalist movements. These were reasserted in post-independence policies and programmes (Agarwal 1988). Additionally, they argued that these were instruments of patriarchal power and a means to subordinate women.¹⁸ They propagated conflicts and violence and justified inequities and asymmetries that organised women’s

¹⁵ Satish Deshpande has argued that although the dominant anthropological perspective in India ‘did not show deep or sustained interest in social *change*, except in the form of enquiries into the decay or degeneration of traditional practices, institutions and communities’ (2004: 175), it is still possible to identify three ways in which modernisation was seen in relation ‘to the enduring but not unchanging traditional system’ as ‘a) tradition prevails over modernity absorbing or obstructing it successfully; b) modernity triumphs over tradition, undermining and eventually supplanting it; or c) tradition and modernity coexist in fashion’ with the last position dominating the discussions in India (ibid.: 176).

¹⁶ One of the key areas of theoretical interrogation in the initial years of feminist discussions was the elaboration of the concept and theory of Indian patriarchy. Gail Omvedt wrote an extensive note on this concept for the Research Centre of Women’s Studies (RCWS) at Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey (SNDT) Women’s University, and this note as well as those by others (e.g. Agarwal 1988) was used by various researchers for teaching and learning of women’s studies. Later, these concepts were re-published in a series edited by Maithreyi Krishnaraj titled *Theorising Feminism*. For the new rendition of the concept of patriarchy, see Geetha (2007). On the history of the series, see Krishnaraj (2007).

¹⁷ ‘Middle class reforms undertaken on behalf of women are tied up with the self definition of class, with a new division of the public from the private sphere and of course with a cultural nationalism...’ (Sangari and Vaid 1989: 9).

¹⁸ For instance, Sangari and Vaid argue that

Both tradition and modernity have been in India, carriers of patriarchal ideologies.... Both tradition and modernity are eminently colonial constructs... we need to see how woman and womanhood are inserted into and affected by social change, and how change is made to appear as continuity. That is the ideologies of women as carriers of tradition often disguise, mitigate, compensate, contest actual changes taking place. Womanhood is often part of an asserted or desired, not an actual cultural continuity (1989: 17).

status at the workplace and within the economy, in the political system and in their home (Singh and Kelles-Viitanen 1987). No wonder feminist studies placed the debate of social theory squarely within the project of critical social science.

II

The feminist project

Before I frame the particulars of my argument, let me present some caveats. I use the phrase feminist studies very deliberately, although I recognise that in India, feminist studies were presented to its audience as women's studies (Pappu 2002, 2008).¹⁹ For me, feminist studies are studies that include reflection, research and teaching about the way power organises the relations of gender as they intersect with class, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, nation and region, ability and other differences through its structures and institutions. The practitioners of women's studies in India in the mid-1970s conceptualised women's studies in this way and thereby distinguished it from the pre-mid 1970s perspectives that engaged with the women's question (Desai 1995). They, thus, argued that their practice was fundamentally different from the earlier understanding of the women's question. The post mid-1970s focused squarely on women's subordination unlike the earlier position which highlighted their evolutionary inclusion in the processes that made modern India (see Jain 1975; Mazumdar 1976). More specifically, their work documented a shift from a perspective that promoted women's education as a means to augment women's status and knowledge to the one that evaluated the differential incorporation of women in the colonial and nationalist political project. Their work focused on the structural frames of class and caste that restricted and constrained women's recognition and their participation equally in the institutions of family, work and labour, politics and culture (Desai and Krishnaraj 1987).

The focus of their analysis was on ideas and ideologies, literature and consciousness, norms and values of everyday lives (Thorner and Krishnaraj 2000). This was enhanced by an examination of the way institutions and structures of the household relate to work and labour and to economy and polity (Krishnaraj and Chanana 1988). Not only did women's studies

¹⁹ See Desai (1995) for the reasons for this.

as feminist studies shift the 1950s and 1960s focus on the 'middle class' women towards the poor, the deprived and the marginalised, but by doing so, it established that the analysis of the entire set of relationships organising contemporary India is enmeshed in structures of domination and subordination as defined in and through patriarchy. The assertion that these relationships are embedded in the experience of the political and thus of patriarchal power, in overt and covert conflicts and through normal and extraordinary violence (Kannabiran 2005), allowed the feminist perspective to move beyond the limited Marxist materialist position of class and examine these sociabilities as being contiguously constructed and structured within the private and public domains.²⁰

The practitioners of women's studies have noted many of these achievements as being steps in the formulations of this discipline and its institutionalisation in India (Desai 1995; Krishnaraj 1986; Mazumdar 1994). However, I would like to suggest that these achievements also reframed the discipline of sociology in India and shook it out of its slumber, particularly its epistemic location within the colonial discourse.²¹ I am not suggesting this only because the main actors organising women's studies in India were by and large sociologists/anthropologists²² or were influenced by sociological concerns,²³ neither am I arguing that this was because in a large number of cases, women's studies departments found their homes in the departments of sociology of various universities in India, starting

²⁰ It is important to note that in its initial decade of existence, the feminist studies engaged with the problem through Marxist orientation (see C.S. Lakshmi, 'Interview of Neera Desai', 13–15 June 2003. Available at <http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/55735>. Accessed on 15 February 2014).

²¹ The later parts of this article explain the ways that this epistemic reorientation was organised. Interestingly, feminist thought has not made a similar intervention in the fields of political science and economics.

²² On the divisions structuring sociology and anthropology, see Patel (2011a: xiii–xviii).

²³ Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj in Bombay and Leela Dube in Delhi identified themselves as sociologists and anthropologists respectively, and the Status of Women report which Vina Mazumdar organised and wrote with Leela Dube and Neera Desai together with other members of the Committee gave a historical and sociological perspective to the conditions that organised women's subordination (C.S. Lakshmi, 'Interview of Vina Mazumdar', 11–13 July 2003. Available at <http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/55726>. Accessed on 15 February 2014). See Dube (2000) for testimony of the extensive work of collation and interpretation done to understand gendered dimensions of kinship and caste system.

from Bombay²⁴ and western India and later across the country. Undeniably, however, there was an institutional implication of this linkage and this is significant for our discussion: in addition to the research that this first generation of women studies/sociologist/anthropologist scholars initiated, dissertations and theses were being written by their research students and those whom they nurtured and mentored.²⁵ An entire generation of sociologists/anthropologists grew to view themselves as feminists and as sociologists and anthropologists. The work of the first and increasingly of the second generation has slowly and surely changed the discipline of sociology, initially through unobtrusive and silent steps and in the last decade or more through their extensive publications and the roles played by them as leaders of and in these departments.²⁶ If we just collate the titles of the MPhil and PhD theses written on the women's question in sociology departments from 1975 onwards,²⁷ first in western India and then in northern, southern and eastern India, we will be able to understand this impact in clear terms. It would be relevant to mention here that this change needs to be located in the context of a secular and demographic shift taking place initially in western India and later across the country that saw the increasing presence of women of all classes and castes entering into coeducational universities.

²⁴ The RCWS started in the Department of Sociology at the SNTD Women's University (C.S. Lakshmi, 'Interview of Neera Desai', 13–15 June 2003. Available at <http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/55735>. Accessed on 15 February 2014; Desai 1995).

²⁵ Maithreyi Krishnaraj and Veena Poonacha, both Directors of RCWS, did their doctorates at the Department of Sociology, SNTD Women's University. Leela Dube was a mentor/interlocutor to many second-generation scholars such as Rajni Palriwala and Kamala Ganesh.

²⁶ In many universities, when the first-generation male leaders in the departments of sociology started retiring, women took over leadership roles, for example, Veena Das became Head of the Sociology department at the Delhi School of Economics in 1994. At the University of Bombay, this trend took place much later. However, in the Indian Sociological Society (ISS), women were active as members and in 1986–88, Suma Chitnis and Neera Desai became Secretary and Treasurer of the ISS, respectively. It took more than a decade for the next woman leader to take over a leadership role in ISS when in 1996–97, Mohini Anjum became the Treasurer. ISS had never had a woman President (until now) nor until 2013 had a woman scholar been asked to give the Srinivas or Mukerjee lecture. The presence of women in official positions in the late 1980s has more to do with the politics of regional networks controlling the ISS, first from western India and later from northern India, rather than an acceptance of women's professional leadership (Irawati Karve in Pune was an exception). On this politics, see Patel (2002).

²⁷ A study of such dissertations and theses has still to be undertaken.

III

Feminist challenges to sociology

Thomas Kuhn (1962) has argued that new paradigms do not emerge through acts of falsification, rather new paradigms sit with old ones which he calls 'normal science', without displacing them—in fact, sometimes normal science or old paradigms sharpen their scientific practices as they take challenges posed by the new ones. This is exactly what happened with sociology which sat with women's studies while ignoring it most of the time. When its precepts started chipping away slowly away at sociology's self-defined boundaries, the latter started incorporating some aspects of gender analysis. Srinivas's (1984) sudden interest in the dowry question can be cited as an example of such incorporations.²⁸ A case can perhaps be made that sociology ghettoised women's studies within courses such as 'Women and Society' which started being taught in the end 1980s and early 1990s and later through a course such as 'Sociology of Gender' and through the establishment of a separate research committee of ISS on women, and that the ISS has rarely invited a feminist to present a feminist perspective in its symposiums as against a sociological one.²⁹ However, the fact that the radical content of women's studies provoked one male sociologist of the discipline to make a frontal attack on its feminist perspective in 1995 and then to declare that no women studies scholar in India is a feminist (Gupta 1996a: 1546) suggests that feminist studies had made a mark after being in existence for only a decade.³⁰

Before we proceed any further, there is need to make another caveat. It is important to accept that the field of sociology (as other disciplines), though referred to in the singular, is extremely diverse and unevenly organised and can be differentiated at two levels. The first level of division is the diversity of scholars and scholarship, that is, the way scholars

²⁸ The same is true for Dhanagare (2014) and Oommen (2006) who have since the 1990s shown increasing interest in gender questions. On the limitation of Srinivas's approach on gender and women's studies, see Krishnaraj (2002).

²⁹ A perfunctory glance at the titles of the symposiums and names of invitees would confirm this position.

³⁰ One of the many ways to be critical is to deny the existence of a perspective and its contributions. Gupta (1995, 1996a) uses this strategy effectively. His polemical commentary led many feminists to debate with him and affirm the many ways Indian feminist studies have contributed to social sciences.

have organised theories, methodologies and method; sometimes these differences are related to schools and geographical locations.³¹ Thus, there is diversity in terms of integration of the feminist concerns within these different perspectives. While some perspectives such as Marxism have been more open to feminist concerns, others such as structural–functionalism have been less so.³² Second, there is also diversity in the institutionalisation of the practices of these perspectives as these manifest themselves in teaching, research and publications; this creates unevenness in the professionalisation of the discipline. Many commentators have argued that the unevenness in the profession³³ in terms of its practices is a consequence of unequal access to adequate and competent financial, human, physical and intellectual resources to teaching communities in various universities of the country. This unequal access is also related to inadequate and almost non-existent production of regional language intellectual resources. Over time, this unevenness has been converted into a division that positions non-English state universities in mofussil towns as lower and English language central universities in metropolitan cities as higher.³⁴ Thus, when I suggest that feminist studies have posed a challenge to the field of sociology, it is important to recognise that this challenge is not to be understood in the singular but in the way it has been institutionalised in unequal and diverse ways. Thus, feminist interrogation has also been integrated in the discipline unevenly. No wonder the most pedantic interpretations of feminist positions have sat side by side with highly complex ones. My focus is on the latter.

I have already indicated that the major achievement of feminist/women's studies has been to present an alternate theory of modernity and its main contours have been outlined above. To reiterate, this theory argued

³¹ On the Bombay school, see Savur (2011) and on its differential impact in Maharashtra, see Dhanagare (2011).

³² On the other hand, though not a Marxist, Leela Dube's feminist work and research have fundamentally changed the understanding of kinship and caste systems and brought to the fore the discussion on how anthropology has to revise itself when it analyses the domains of family, marriage and kinship. See Dube (1986, 1988, 2000, 2001).

³³ Oommen argues that the discipline is characterised by little professional competence. See T.K. Oommen, 'Professions without professionalism?', *Seminar*, 2000, (495): 24–28.

³⁴ As a consequence, the field has become hierarchised in terms of its representation in professional language, with the discipline showcasing the best and hiding its worse (Patel 2006, 2011c).

that capitalist social change was inaugurated in and through colonialism; that these changes brought about new forms of inequalities between various groups and between women and men in India; that the colonial state with the help of the 'indigenous' middle-class elite reconstituted these inequalities by creating a new discourse of traditions and traditionalism that legitimised these new hierarchies; and that this discourse came to be inscribed in law and various policies of the colonial state and also ironically became part of the consciousness of the nationalist Indian elite, thus getting legitimised as a way to present the women's question in pre-independent India.

This theory of modernity, I am arguing, has changed the epistemic concerns of what constituted sociology in four distinct ways:

- 1) It introduced a notion of power as central to an assessment of all relationships and argued that the women's question should be located and understood in terms of distribution of cultural, political and economic resources. As a consequence, sociology in India had to grapple with the concept of power, which was not even recognised, leave alone theorised. Even today, the specialisation of political sociology, which focuses on power as a category, is least developed in non-feminist and non-Marxist oriented sociological traditions and remains weakly articulated in established mainstream sociology. Most sociology departments do not teach political sociology.³⁵ Feminist studies intervened in the domain of power at three levels: (a) at the substantive level—in terms of an assessment of the structures of distribution of resources and an assessment of the political system that organised formal power, but its most important contribution was in laying bare the nature of power in the private invisible domain—in the family, household and kin systems and in the organisation of sexuality (Dube 1986; Dube and Palriwala 1990; Saradmoni 1992); (b) by connecting power and knowledge, feminist theories gave a theory for relating everyday ideas and practices with ideologies and consciousness (Thorner and Krishnaraj 2000);

³⁵ The first short review on the state of art in political sociology was done by Gupta (1996b) to be followed nearly two decades later by an introduction in Kumar (2014). These reviews do not give space to the discussion on the sociological idea of 'male domination' because its time has come very late in sociological thought in India.

and (c) it argued that knowledge itself is power and interrogated the epistemic and methodological moorings of the field. As a consequence, not only were the methodological assumptions of value neutrality and that of ethnographic distance promoted by sociology and social anthropology questioned but the framing of the entire corpus of sociological knowledge and its assumptions was also questioned (Chakravarti 1989, 1998, 2006).

- 2) The second aspect is related to the first whereby a sense of time and that of its theory and methodology was introduced. An engagement with the theories of Marxist history and historiography was central to the quest of feminist studies in their endeavour to comprehend women's subordination in India (Chakravarti 2003). And herein lies the most significant challenge that feminist studies presented to the contemporary sociological discussion in India which promoted an ahistorical epistemology. Although a sense of history and a form of evolutionism was something that was always present in sociological discussions whether on caste, religion and on family and kinship,³⁶ this was enmeshed in orientalist methodologies and thus a notion of past which was located in ancient India. G.S. Ghurye embodied this orientation most clearly and it flowed into much of sociological thought and remains present even today.³⁷ Ghurye's sociological oeuvre was located within what is known as 'traditional nationalist discourse', a discourse that valorised the ancient past (the golden age) as a way to construct and understand the present and, thus, to build a new future for India (Patel 2013).

For the traditionalist nationalist intellectuals from which mainstream sociology drew, 'it is precisely the present [given the colonial experience] from which we feel we must escape' (Chatterjee 1997: 20). As a result, the desire to be creative and search for new principles of modernity were now transposed to the past of India, a past ironically organised in and through orientalist methodologies

³⁶ Some commentators have mistaken the evolutionary perspective in Ghurye (1932) where he traces the changes in the concept of caste through four periods in two chapters with a critical historical perspective. For example, see Celarent (2011).

³⁷ See the detailed expositions made on Ghurye by Upadhyaya (2002, 2007). On Ghurye's Orientalism, see Patel (2013).

and thus within colonial modernity. No wonder Chatterjee suggests that these intellectuals ‘construct a picture of “those days” when there was beauty, prosperity and healthy sociability. This makes the very modality of our coping with modernity radically different from the historically evolved modes of Western modernity’ (ibid.: 19). In a different way, the historian Sumit Sarkar (1997) makes a similar argument when he suggests that while Western and modern history writing has generally been state oriented with an understanding of nation as a reflection of the nation state, the historical consciousness of the Indian intelligentsia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was oriented to the valourisation of culture against the state.

As argued earlier, feminist studies in India questioned and demolished the shibboleths that valourised ‘traditions’ and exposed their moorings in covert and overt violence.³⁸ Feminists made a critique of the late 19th century reform movement and argued that this was limited to a discussion of the religious basis of these practices and on the fine points of scriptural interpretation, and legitimised the civilising missions of colonialism and evangelism.³⁹ More

³⁸ It is interesting to note that the birth of feminist historiography and subaltern studies took place within years of each other. Both shared many characteristics, such as their focus on the marginalised; an attempt to unearth the histories of the marginalised/subaltern from their own perspectives; the use of non-conventional sources, for example, the vernacular and life histories, narratives and oral records; and the deconstruction of the archive and the formal text (in the case of feminists for male bias) together with a critique of orientalist positions. However, there were significant differences between feminist historians and the subaltern position. The early feminist historians were Marxists or influenced by Marxist feminism and were interested in analysing the cultural in its entanglements with the political-economic. They, thus, critiqued an essentialist and culturist interpretation associated with ‘traditions’ which they suggested was patriarchal. Their questions regarding history emerged from their engagement with their own, sometimes radical, involvements with contemporary feminist politics (see Geetha 2011 on how the issues of the present made Uma Chakravarti re-render the ‘ancient’ past). The subaltern perspective was against all master narratives, including the master narrative of the enlightenment, a position with which feminists would not and do not agree. As a consequence, both held different points of view on the notion of agency. On this, see Sarkar (1994) and Nair (1994).

³⁹ While earlier feminists were interested in understanding how patriarchy was structured and reproduced today, contemporary feminist historians are interested in understanding the way women from various regions of the country were engaged in contesting patriarchal discourses on womanhood and were creating roles for themselves that often differed from male perceptions and aspirations for them (Nair 1994).

particularly, the discussion on women's entitlements within the family system brought out the deep organic relationship between modern laws, colonial constructions of religion and the framing of the family in India.⁴⁰ For sociology, this was a revolutionary intellectual intervention. Not only did this orientation displace the thesis of 'modernity of tradition' but it also simultaneously recognised the fact that Indian modernity was inaugurated with colonialism. Feminists were asserting an argument which some Marxists had presented earlier: the discourse of traditions and the valorisation of the principle of purity and pollution were organising and legitimising material and was constitutive of social processes of inequalities within India. Even today, a significant number of sociologists find it difficult to state that India has been a modern society since the time of colonialism and possibly even before that where traditions have been reconstituted in many ways to legitimise control of women's bodies, actions/agencies and representations of themselves. It has also been difficult for many sociologists to acknowledge that its so-called 'traditions' were constructs frozen to argue that its modernity was very new and particularly a post-Independence phenomenon.

Thus, feminist studies have interrogated the intellectual insularity that had structured sociology as a discipline. After independence, sociologists in India had affirmed a need to have a sociological language that can comprehend the uniqueness of Indian nation, its culture and its civilisation. Sociologists in India saw their project as that which analyses one's own society and nation in one's 'own terms', without colonial and now neocolonial tutelage. This project allowed for the institutionalisation of a particularistic *problematique*, namely, an assessment of the changes occurring within India's characteristic institutions such as caste, kinship, family and religion. This particularistic *problematique* had much in common with the notion of India embedded within elite and thus mainstream nationalism. Hence, sociologists examined modernity and modernisation (in the context of nation building) and the changes occurring within the institutions of family, caste, kinship

⁴⁰ Contemporary historians have framed nuanced positions on the nature of colonial law and its relationship with the private domain. On this, see Tambe (2000).

and religion as part of analysis which they termed 'structure and change' (Patel 2006, 2011a, 2011c). As against this, feminist studies opened up its theoretical discussion to new intellectual trends organising contemporary social sciences, such as structuralism and psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and postcolonialism, and showed awareness of the comparative processes of subordination taking place in various parts of the world, particularly in the Global South, something the sociologists and anthropologists have rarely examined. As a consequence, a window to new ideas opened up, making sociology in India engage once again with international trends.⁴¹ Additionally, feminists have also made comparative analysis of the regional and local variations of women's subordination within the country, again a methodological innovation which contemporary sociology and social anthropology had not addressed; some mainstream sociological traditions continue to valorise the micro, which it suggests defines the macro: a study of caste relations in a village is a generalisation about what happens in India. Feminist scholarship has suggested that a contextual analysis necessarily moves backwards and forwards between micro, meso and the macro.

- 3) As a consequence, feminist studies argued that everyday practices organise women's subordination and that these were expressed and legitimised in and through various norms, values and ideologies, institutions and structures, and that these intersected differentially with class, caste, ethnicity, region/nation and religion. Certainly, sociology in India had a notion of cultural diversity but it had little to no intellectual resources to comprehend the diversities in and of intersectional subordinations.⁴² Sociologists have tended to understand order and change in a linear fashion. For example, some presented a thesis that caste becomes class as the traditional system moves towards being modern, or that caste transforms itself as ethnic groups as a consequence of secular trends or that modernisation

⁴¹ Feminists have had no engagement with what sociologists have called the indigenous perspective. On this, see the discussions on the Lucknow School (Thakur 2014).

⁴² Various feminists have taken this position. See the work of Chakravarti (1998, 2003), Kannabiran (2012) and Rege (2006).

changes villages into towns and cities. On the other hand, because contexts and interdisciplinarity are so critical for feminists, linear analysis has little or no place and relevance in feminist studies.

- 4) There was one more methodological challenge presented to sociology and this was in connection to the notion, concept and theory about agency. As we know, sociological inquiry brings together three elements—order, change and action—when it analyses the dynamics that interrelates action with order and change. Action became redefined in feminist thought when it linked subjectivities/experience to agency. In feminist studies, these subjectivities—also called narratives—were initially given epistemic privilege. However, when feminists interrogated women’s involvement in dowry deaths wherein women were accused of murdering other women, there emerged doubts on the use of experience as a privileged epistemic category to understand agency and the affirmations that there was a complex interplay of structures of dominations and individual agencies. These methodological doubts were later reinforced when studies documented women’s involvement in communal riots and their participation in rightist and Hindutva movements (Sarkar 1991). Later, these queries have been sharply posed in the context of active participation of women in the murder of the female foetus and the girl child, and have led many to ask whether one can give epistemic privilege to actions which are inherently patriarchal, thus suggesting a need to disaggregate the category of women. This has led some feminists to use poststructuralist analysis while some others have reframed the problematique of agency.⁴³ And yet others have raised fundamental issues regarding the organic connections between knowledge and power and agency and critical social science.⁴⁴

⁴³ Nair (1994) argues that feminist agency combines both assertion and resistance and is goal driven, thus embracing an effort to bring about change in power relationships. It is also relational and takes place in context with other forms of agencies, coexisting and competing with them.

⁴⁴ The adoption of poststructuralist positions by feminists and other scholars has made many to argue that the state has unlimited domination. As a consequence, scholars have ignored ways in which consciousness, new subjectivities and interventions have questioned the power of the state.

IV *Conclusion*

In an earlier contribution (Patel 2011a), I had argued that sociology in India had gone through major upheavals in the 1980s. In this article, I am suggesting that without feminist studies dethroning the main foundations of received sociological practices, the subsequent changes in the discipline which took place in the late 1980s would not have been possible. The displacement of 'traditional' paradigms of family and kinship, caste and religion led sociological traditions in India to reframe the discipline and introduce interdisciplinary ways of doing theories and new methodologies, allowing for reflections on both nature of modernity and contemporary institutions of domination that organise social processes in India. This interrogation also created conditions in the late 1980s for other subaltern perspectives such as dalit studies (Guru 2011) and tribal studies (Sundar 2007) to mark its presence in the discipline and allowed the insular India-oriented sociological tradition to open itself to a dialogue with international and global traditions of social sciences.

In this article, I have also suggested that in many ways, the contemporary trajectories within sociological traditions in India reflect similar trends to those within the sociological traditions in the Global North (Patel 2010b). However, it is important to note two differences: first, unlike the latter, the causes that led to these changes within sociology in India were significantly different; in the Indian case, these were related to the feminist interventions. Second, the contribution of feminist studies to issues relating to the nature of evidence and more generally to the science question can be termed, at best, weak. In the Global North, the churnings in the discipline led to the growth of new thematic focus—what Michael Burawoy has called reflexive sociology.⁴⁵ Reflexive sociology has redefined its contemporary stance by interrogating the tensions between science, scientific knowledge and everyday practices, incorporating not only Karl Marx's initial precepts on sociology of knowledge but also that of Max Weber's on objectivity in social science and Emile Durkheim's perspective on the relevance of social facts, together with deliberations from the Frankfurt theorists and structuralist and poststructuralist interventions.

⁴⁵ Burawoy (2007) divides the field of sociology into four quadrants: professional, reflexive, policy and public.

Today, no sociological theory can constitute itself in this global world without relating to these methodological and epistemic issues of knowledge and that of praxiological concerns. As a consequence, in today's post-positivist perspective, competing theories of reflexivity (e.g. Bourdieu, Giddens, Gouldner, Beck and Collins) are being used as tools to further develop new theories of modernity. This legacy is of significance because without going back to the global debates on reflexive sociology, it will be difficult to go forward and work out new practices of doing empirical studies both within India and in the larger world. Feminist studies has presented this challenge to sociology in India; while shaking its foundations, it has allowed sociology to reconfigure its disciplinary practices and thereby reaffirmed sociology's key identity of methodological and epistemological reflections as a basis of organising its theories of modernity.

What I have presented here is a framework to understand the linkages between feminist studies and sociology. Feminist studies cannot substitute sociology nor can sociology substitute feminist studies. Both need to grow in constant dialogue but also in tension with each other. Therein lies the future for both these systems of knowledge.

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