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Claiming the Dawn Sky: The Growth of the Geography of Gender in India.

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The growth of the geography of gender in India is akin to the image of the swiftly expanding horizons of the dawn sky. The illustration is apt in more ways than one, particularly as this report of progress in the subfield goes to press. Continuity, innovation, originality and spread are the basis on which this analogy is drawn. The subfield represents a confident opening up that has successfully integrated gender as an analytical category to much of geographical research. Situated on the frontiers of the discipline, the subfield is uniquely positioned to allow an almost unparalleled scope to enlarge the realm and relevance of geographical enquiry.

From only a small trickle of research in the eighties, the subfield has witnessed a gradual yet cautious widening in the nineties. By the year 2000, the field had expanded enough to attempt to claim for itself its share of academic space in the discipline and to merit a separate chapter in the status report on the progress of geography in India¹. The current report is a continuation of the same and draws upon many of the arguments put forward in the former.

To begin with, the progress in the subfield must be sited within the general context of teaching and research in human geography in India. Within the present scenario, a large number of post graduate departments continue to be a part of the faculty of sciences, rather than social sciences. Further, mainstream praxis in much of human geography remains geared towards policy planning and analysis. Yet it is extremely heartening to note that the field has witnessed an almost exponential expansion in the period under review. The introduction of new courses that interrogate spatial patterns with reference to gender and the incremental volume of geographical research using gender as a category of analysis are major milestones marking the development of the subfield.

As mentioned in the earlier report, a welcome development has been the inclusion of the geography of gender as a paper in the model curriculum for undergraduate courses proposed by the University Grants commission². At the time of writing it may be mentioned that two full fledged papers are currently on offer as part of the M.A and M. Phil programmes at the University of Delhi (426: Gender and Space with special reference to India; Gender and Development). Discourses on Gender and the spatial find representation in at least five of the papers in the MA syllabus at JNU (502: Levels of regional development in India, 508: Socio cultural dimensions of regionalization in India,

532: Population and environment, 639: Regional dimension of female labour force, 646: Gender and development with special reference to India). The department of Geography of the SNTD University also lists a course on gender geography as part of its MA syllabus (07121: Gender Geography). Further, the subfield finds passing, often fleeting mention on the web pages of a number of geography departments/ faculty profiles as a prospective research area (for example, Kurukshetra University, Jamia Millia, Gauhati University among others). The spatial spread is to be noted and is indicative of the acceptance and expansion of the field.

From being almost invisible, gender as an analytical category has seeped into almost every field of geographical enquiry. Research papers using gender include themes on health, development, workforce participation, food security, conflict, disaster management, environment issues, resources, micro credit, and policy planning among others (see list of works reviewed for details). In terms of sheer volume alone, this is definitely indicative of an expanding subfield. This development could perhaps be better explained through a set of etic - exogenous factors, with the post Beijing concern for women's empowerment and the academic preoccupation with the millennium development goals³ being the most prominent. Emic -endogenous factors that may have played a significant role could be the introduction of the new courses and overhaul of existing syllabi, among others. The two sets of factors are expected to continue to push further developments in the subfield.

Yet the widening of the field is not synonymous with its deepening. Most works continue to be descriptive rather than analytical. Barring a few studies, the engagement of space with gender and vice versa remains largely glossed over by geographers⁴. The larger research input into these themes has come not from geographers but sociologists (Abraham 2007, Nair 2007, Phadke 2006, Vishvanathan 2007, among others). Similarly, economists too have been tempted to interrogate place and space to explain status of women and implications of their work (see Kodoth 2005, Krishna 2005).

Among geographers, by and large, most works reflect the equating of site with space and sex with gender (see for example, Gulati and Sharma 2004, Kapoor 2006, Kumar 2006, Laxmi Devi 2006, Sannashiddannanavar 2007 among others). Conspicuous by their paucity are studies which engage directly with the themes of gendered experience of space, gendered spaces and spatialities of gender. Ironically, the spatial turn in the social sciences places these themes firmly within the ambit of geographical enquiry, bringing space to the forefront of analysis, explanation and interrogation. It could be argued that in much of the Indian context, rigidity of disciplinary boundaries and a circumscription of the geographical understandings of space to include only a two dimensional tangible space has led to the greater appropriation of these spatial themes by sister disciplines (see Raju 2004, Datta and De 2008).

On a more optimistic note however, one must comment that the subfield is among the least hegemonic in its praxis. Innovativeness of themes and method distinguish it from the largely moribund mainstream. Perusal of list of dissertations submitted in at least two centres⁵ reveals a steady stream of ongoing research using a healthy combination of

qualitative methods along with the quantitative. (see Anand 2006, Chandramukhee 2004 , Misra 2004, Moinuddin 2007 among others). The interrogation of space and sexuality is another optimistic development that deserves mention (Bhairannavar 2005, 2007). One can only foresee a furthering of this trend in the future.

Of critical importance for both the deepening as well as the widening of the field is the interrogation of colonial praxis, the search for post colonial alternatives in explanation and description, together with the inclusion of qualitative research methods as part of the post graduate training imparted⁶. The innovativeness in method, willingness to combine the qualitative with the statistical, the emotional with the tangible will ultimately stand the field in good stead, placing it on a continuous trajectory of development. From not holding half the sky to claiming the dawn sky, the journey has been one of cautious (perhaps contentious) opening of the field. Today this subfield is firmly rooted and unabashed in its growth and development, constantly pushing at the disciplinary edge and enlarging the field of human geography.

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NOTES.

¹ Raju S and A Datta (2004) 'On Not Holding Half the Sky: Gender in Indian Geography', in H.N Sharma (ed) *Progress in Indian Geography: A Country Report, 30th International Geographical Congress, Glasgow*, Indian National Science Academy, 2004, Delhi. pp 131-134.

² University Grants Commission, (2001), 'UGC Model Curriculum in Geography, University Grants Commission, New Delhi.

³ See <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml> and <http://www.undp.org/mdg/goallist.shtml> for details. At least four of these goals demand reference to and an enquiry of gender roles and relations within the local regional contexts.

⁴ Much work in this direction has been produced by PUKAR under their gender and space project with the city of Mumbai as the backdrop. Similarly Jagori (An NGO dealing with consciousness raising and awareness building on women's issues) in Delhi has produced interesting work on the way in which women engage with public spaces. See Ranade 2007, Phadke 2005, 2007, Vishvanathan et al 2007.

⁵ While dissertations submitted at the department of Geography, Delhi School of Economics are cited here, I am privy to the fact that this is true for other post graduate

departments of geography as well, especially the CSRD, JNU, based on dissertations sent to me for evaluation and personal communication with faculty.

⁶A dedicated journal or atleast a working paper series, together with annual seminars and workshops are other inputs that would go a long way in sustaining the field. In the early nineties a newsletter of the gender and geography study group was initiated by Prof Saraswati Raju with inputs from students at the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, JNU. Many of these are now in teaching positions in different universities. It would be worthwhile to revive the newsletter or initiate a working paper series.

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