

# Challenges and contradictions in women studies

**MANINDER SIDHU**

*“...another cell in the university beehive.”*  
— Jacques Derrida

**W**OMEN'S Studies Centres (WSCs), the first of its kind founded by the sociologist Neera Desai, not long after the inauguration of the field at Cornell University in 1969, rose to 163 by 2019. The publication of 'Towards Equality: A Report on the Status of Women in India' in 1974 led the UGC to take cognisance of gender disparity and social injustice, and support women's studies in various Five-Year Plans thereafter. Not only were women's studies made a part of the education policy in 1986, some of the centres, including the one at Panjab University, were later upgraded to statutory departments for teaching and research.

Institutionalisation of the feminist agenda of gender equality was a step towards course correction that aimed to bring about social transformation. Given that it has fallen short of bringing about marked societal change, there is an urgent need to analyse the current state of WSCs and the challenges they face. This compilation, edited by Panchali Ray and Shadab Bano, critiques the contemporary state of WSCs to unveil obdurate mindsets, ambivalent policies and capitalist pressures attempting to shift the focus from research and

reform that empowers women en masse to the tokenism of representation and urgency of professionalism.

Mindful of the Nehruvian-era political exigencies and complacency, the radical feminism of the 1970s, the history of institutionalising WS as an interdisciplinary discourse in the universities and related pedagogical dilemmas like inter-disciplinarity and theory, the book draws attention to the interventionist nature of the State in knowledge production and its role in diverting the focus away from the vision and objectives of the feminist pioneers.

It argues that the WSCs were supported by the Centre till the 12th Five Year Plan, giving the “floundering institutions a new lease of life”. The requirement of mandatory yearly renewal by the UGC made the situation precarious post-2014 as the “threat of discontinuing/reducing funds to all interdisciplinary spaces” loomed large.

In the Introduction, the editors write, “At the moment, when WSCs are not just using intersectional analysis but also rethinking class, caste, race, ability, gender and sexuality, not as pre-given or transparent categories, but both synchronically and diachronically produced, there are threats of shutting down such spaces. Do WSCs now toe the government line of being merely spaces that equip women to fight for inclusion without questioning the gendered, classed, sexualised, racial/ethnic, and caste hierarchies to



## TEACHING/WRITING RESISTANCE: WOMEN'S STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

by Panchali Ray and Shadab Bano.

Orient BlackSwan.

Pages 200.

₹1,260

ensure continuity of funds?” It states apprehensions not just about defunding, but also increasing privatisation, consolidation of right-wing forces, subservience of education to capitalist economy, skewed emphasis on skill-based learning, New Education Policy and the overall marginalisation of critical thought.

The paradox posed by the sweeping post-structuralist thought to feminist studies is not lost on the scholars. On one hand, the category of ‘woman’ as a subject of feminist studies lies destabilised; on the other, feminism cannot do without the deconstructive thrust of theory to interrogate cultural, social and economic strongholds. The

reader can trace the ideological source of LGBTQ voices pushing for renaming the WSCs as ‘centres for gender and sexuality studies’, just when the hegemonic social order is intent on rechristening them as ‘centres for women and family studies’.

The eight chapters are arranged in three interesting, theme-based sections. Authored by prominent academicians/activists like Devika Jain, Sunera Thobani and Mary E John, the articles cover the story of the discipline from its genesis to its open-ended future. Quite evidently, the contributors regret the prevailing state of WSCs, founded as they were as an intellectual arm of the women's movement for the purpose of reconstructing knowledge and catalysing change. Disconnecting from public space, the centres, “instead of being outward-looking have become inward-looking”, and the “processing of graduates” has taken precedence over critical understanding of exclusion, discrimination, and oppression. Along with concerns around “depoliticisation, NGOisation, and professionalisation” of women's studies, the issue of the “elusive presence” of caste in the curricula, the realities of non-metropolitan locations and some challenging pedagogic experiences are articulated with élan.

This forceful and timely edition will be a valuable addition to book racks of all academic departments with gender associations, or rather, universal human concerns.