

## **GENDER AND GEOGRAPHY: AN OVERVIEW FROM INDIA**

*From Saraswati Raju and M. Satish, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi*

Though the discipline of geography has come a long way from an adventurous exploration of the surface of the earth, its emerging concerns have yet to make a significant breakthrough in terms of what geography addresses or ought to address. In the Anglo-Saxon world social sciences have leaned towards an holistic concept of knowledge, i.e. phenomena were to be understood in their totality. Ironically, the quest for holistic explanation in Indian geography resulted in an emphasis on physical elements such as flora, soil, weather and climate, often leaving out the human element and its expression at both the individual and institutional levels. Most importantly, at no time did Indian geography become involved in the debate on the nature of geography. Whatever form this took in the Western world was imported and accepted rather uncritically. Thus human geography in India, as in the Western world, had a treatment of woman that at best remained incidental, peripheral or subservient to that of man. Given the empirical tradition of geographical knowledge, women were not altogether absent; however, they were more often included in a *de facto* or implicit fashion. This intellectual aberration is not unique to Indian geography as the other papers in this series testify.

It was not until recently that gender became an issue for serious analysis. In

India, as elsewhere, the concern for women as a subject for study arose as part of larger issues at stake within the rubric of social geography, although isolated studies can be traced back to the 1960s (Gosal, 1961; Chandna, 1967; Mukerji, 1971). The emerging trends in social geography are not only to identify socio-spatial disparities but also to enquire into related issues of distributive justice. A logical outcome of this ideological position was to take note of deprived segments of the population. Within many communities women especially were found to be deprived, and it is in this context that women have, of late, emerged as worthy of study on the geographical horizon of India. However, this interest in gender is pursued only by a few individual scholars, instead of being part of a collective effort to produce a feminist perspective in geography. Although some isolated courses do offer discussions on women's issues, they are incidental to the development of some other perspective.

The Government of India appointed a National Committee on the Status of Women in 1971. Its aim was to evaluate the changes that had taken place in the status of women as a result of constitutional, legal and administrative measures adopted since Independence. Later the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) decided to commission a series of studies related to the status of women to help this National Committee. A task force was set up composed largely of sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists but with no geographers. In 1982-83 separate fellowships were instituted by the ICSSR for women's studies. However, all such scholarships have been taken by disciplines other than geography.

Most of the universities in the country have extremely structured programmes with very little scope for the incorporation of women as an independent subject for geographical study, except, perhaps, for a few marginal references to women's lives. However, the Centre for the Study of Regional Development at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, warrants a special mention. The Centre, with its multi-disciplinary composition, has undertaken a series of studies on women's issues by geographers, demographers and regional economists. Such studies can broadly be grouped into two categories:

(a) Those which make indirect references to women's issues. These include courses on levels of regional development, labour and agricultural economics, educational development and the geography of social well-being, etc. The emphasis is on developing a regional perspective and women's concerns are addressed in so far as they contribute to an understanding of regional inequalities (see Mitra, 1978, 1979a, b; Chopra, 1979).

(b) Those which are directly related to a geographical analysis of women's issues (see Raju, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1987, 1988).

The topic areas are narrowly confined, however, to studies of labour forces and literacy/educational attainment and gender biases therein. The studies are essentially addressed from a regional point of view pertaining to either rural or urban segments of the Indian population. To date there are six MPhil dissertations submitted which deal with gender issues, and at least two students are pursuing doctoral theses on feminist geography.

Since only recent geographical literature has dealt explicitly with gender issues, its volume is small. The limited scope of this paper does not allow us to evaluate individual research endeavours. In general, the emphasis is on identifying the



regional patterns of literacy, work-participation, fertility and sex-ratios (see Singh & Deen, 1982; Siddiqui, 1982; Swarnkar, 1985; Mittal, 1986). With a few exceptions where attempts were made to correlate parameters with levels of socio-economic development, much of the research is of a descriptive nature and is not placed in a larger regional or national framework. In addition, most of the geographical research on women is essentially based on published data because it is readily available, and issues which require data generation by scholars remain largely untouched. While there is nothing wrong in using published data *per se*, many studies have not been critical of, and sensitive to the many deficiencies of the data. Ahmad's (1985) project is a major step towards rectifying this lacuna whereby data on participation by rural women, including information on regional and social constraints, are being collected using questionnaires. Work by Satish Kumar (1984, 1986) and Nayak & Ahmad (1984) also departs from traditional descriptive analyses.

Geographical research on women has yet to develop a cohesive feminist perspective and an abiding interest among Indian geographers for whom feminism has never been a very popular agenda item for serious academic discussion. Most research, therefore, has been of an *ad hoc* nature, with statements regarding gender issues traditionally coming from non-geographers. However, this state of affairs is slowly changing, the very embryonic nature of the field with its flexibility and potentiality may be seen as an advantageous means of guiding research in desirable directions and approaches for the future.

*Correspondence:* Saraswati Raju and M. Satish, Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi 110067, India.