Spring 1978

Letter from India... Written Later

Florence Howe

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Howe, Florence, "Letter from India... Written Later" (1978). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/267

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Florence Howe

Letter from India... Written Later

This is not an easy letter to write, though I write easily. I could not write it from India. I am undecided even now about how to write it. Perhaps I should begin with pictures: a naked five-year-old girl gently placing a barely-clothed infant in the shade of a parked car, then running before me up the steps of Old Delhi’s grandest mosque, her right hand moving rapidly from her mouth out towards me in a gesture that is unmistakable even on my first day in the noon heat. A bouquet of brilliant saree-draped women—twenty-four circles on the floor before me, as I begin to describe the women’s movement in the United States. “Are any of you bored with your lives as housewives?” I ask timidly. Upstairs afterwards, I watch the young village girls in drab lungi cutting patterns for western baby clothes from newspapers on the floor. Two others pause at the only sewing machines in the room. “Will they be able to work in factories, after this training?” I ask. “Oh, no,” my guide says, “they will marry and help their husbands farm.”

In one of India’s 500,000 villages, I watch five black-sareed women glide by like shadows in the early morning gloom. They have just been to prayers. A young girl, gold ring in her nose, joins the predawn line of villagers bearing buffalo milk to the weighing station in the crumbling frame house. As I walk up the road into the sunrise, tiny, delicate women balancing great tubs of buffalo dung on their headcaps pass me. Their feet are bare, their clothing little more than rags. My Indian escort points towards the great pile of dung ahead and explains that, in winter, women turn the dung into bricks for building or for fuel.

The Conference on Women and Development

Last November, I spent nearly three weeks in India as a Fulbright lecturer. To begin with, I attended a Fulbright-sponsored conference on Women and Development, held in elegant quarters owned by the dairy industry in Anand, near Ahmedabad, the capital city of Gujarat province. The industry employs some two thousand workers, fifteen hundred of them in a milk and milk-products factory, the rest in the hostel that serves as a conference and training site. Only one of these paid employees is a woman—she runs the conference hostel, including the dining room. All the other employees of the clean and modern hostel and factory are males, mostly young men from the surrounding villages in which the women still care for the buffalo (India’s major source of milk and dairy products), still gather the dung.

The conference focused on such rural women, though of course the participants were researchers, academics, government leaders, bureaucrats, foundation staff, as well as trade union leaders and feminist activists. Most were Indian, and slightly more than half were women. With rare exceptions, the handful of foreigners (from the United States, Norway, Switzerland, Bangladesh, and Nepal) did not participate in the painful, bitter, and often angry debate that characterized the conference. The social problems of India—poverty, illiteracy, illness, and unemployment—are exacerbated by a sexism so deep it verges on misogyny.


The basis for the conference, and for all informed discussion of the status of women in India, is a government report produced by a blue-ribbon National Committee on the Status of Women in India. First published in 1975, this report helped to promote inside the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR, in New Delhi) an Advisory Committee on Women’s Studies and a Women’s Studies Programme that “seeks to promote social science research to understand women’s lives and problems and the manner in which they are being affected by the process of social change.” In 1977, the Advisory Committee on Women’s Studies published for broad consumption a pamphlet called Critical Issues on the Status of Women: Suggested Priorities for Action. The “critical issues,” from which the conference began, included the following:

- excessive mortality among women and female children;
- persistent decline in the sex ratio (proportion of women in the population);
- glaring disparity between men and women (among the poorer sections of
the population) in access to health care and medical services;
-increasing gap between men and women in literacy, education, and training for employment;
-accelerated decline in women's employment since 1951.

The report cites "ample evidence" that though "deliberate female infanticide may have been prevented," "the neglect of female infants to the point of letting them die is now progressive." Infant mortality among girls in India is 30 to 60 percent higher than among boys, a unique statistic among nations.

Similarly unique is the sex ratio in India. The normal distribution of population throughout the world shows a slightly higher proportion of women to men. In India the pattern has been different (perhaps because of the earlier practices of female infanticide and sati). "Still more disturbing," according to the report, "is the fact that this proportion has been steadily declining over the decades, with a new sharp decline between 1951 and 1971. As of 1971, there were 930 females for every 1000 males in the Indian population.

Despite the high infant mortality rate, and the large numbers of women who die annually in childbirth, less than 17 percent of total hospital facilities are reserved for maternity. In addition, the report suggests further cause for apprehension: "While the incidence of diseases caused by malnutrition is higher among women, hospital rate of admission and treatment of boys and adult males for these diseases is larger."

Statistics reporting trends in women's illiteracy and in the paid employment of women are equally disturbing. In rural India, the percentage of female literacy has been, and remains, below 10 percent; in general, the statistic, as of 1971, was 18.6 percent. (By 1971, the total number of illiterate women in India was 214.7 million, nearly 50 percent more than twenty years earlier. The majority of illiterate women—88.6 percent—were over 25 years of age.) In the period between 1951 and 1971, while the total number of male workers increased by 27 percent, the total number of female workers declined by 12 percent. "Training facilities within industries and in institutions," the report continues, "remain inaccessible to the majority of women because of their illiteracy."

Papers at the Women and Development conference provided further documentation of these problems and amplified their resistance to change. Feminists were not sanguine about the traditional remedies. Discussing education, for example, Vina Mazumdar said that "promoting the usual literacy campaigns is no answer. We don't have the time. We can't afford to lose one more generation to poverty, illness, and death." Education in India, she stressed both in her formal paper and in private conversations, "has succeeded only in broadening the gulf between privileged women and the mass of poor women."

**Feminism in India**

While there is not a mass feminist movement in India, feminists are to be found in left-wing sectarian groups, and in trade-union organizing, especially among unorganized independent women workers in Gujarat province. Feminists can also be found on some college and university campuses, and among some privileged and professional women generally. On the campus of Delhi University, for example, junior faculty (mainly doctoral candidates) are fighting a leaflet battle against the annual beauty contests. Some of them are simultaneously writing dissertations on lost Indian feminists both preceding and participating in the Gandhian freedom movement.

What is the future of women's studies in India? That is a question I continued to ask myself throughout my three-week visit. Can women's studies—in whatever forms it is capable of assuming—deal constructively with the housekeeper who, reacting to the sudden death of her three-year-old son, sobbed, "My only child, why has God taken from me my only child?"—thus forgetting entirely her two older daughters?

What of the wife of the Professor of English who served lunch to us but did not either join the conversation or eat with us? What of the head of a prestigious women's college who assured me: "Though you may have problems with men in the United States, we have no problems here in India. The men have their lives and we have ours, and they are very good lives."

"We don't want to change anything," she concluded.

Fortunately, not all Indian women agree that nothing needs to be changed. As the following bibliography of women's studies indicates, Indian feminists have begun to investigate the attitudes and forces within their society that have maintained the status quo. And the moving letter from an Indian mother that follows reflects the changes that can be hoped for—and the challenges that can be expected—for a daughter developing into a full human being. □

**Women's Studies in India: A Bibliographical Note**

In two of India's major cities, there are centers for women's studies. Thus far, they are research centers and places where growing library collections allow them to be of use to scholars and to teachers interested in changing their curriculum. Both of these centers would be grateful to U.S. scholars, women's studies centers, publishers, and libraries willing to share their resources and to send copies of books, articles, or pamphlets to India. In the annotations that follow, the address of each center precedes a brief description of its projects and a list of its publications, all of which are recommended as very useful to understanding both the current status of Indian women and the emphases of feminist scholars. In addition, two other books are especially useful. Professor Neera Desai's *Woman in Modern India* (Vora & Co., Publishers, Pvt. Ltd., 3 Round Building, Kalbadevi Road, Bombay 2) was published first in 1957 and reissued in 1977.