

A Discipline in Flux: Four Redefinitions of the Subject in the Sociology of Gender in India, 1974–2024

Mansi Sisodia

Research Scholar, Assistant Professor Department of sociology, SAGE University Bhopal M.P

Abstract

Flux is not a recent condition of gender scholarship in India; it is the condition under which the field was founded. This paper reconstructs the emergence and growth of the sociology of gender in India and argues that its history is best read as a sequence of redefinitions of its own subject, each provoked less by theoretical fashion than by evidence the existing categories could not hold.

The first redefinition was empirical. The 1974 report Towards Equality, with its finding of a declining sex ratio and worsening indicators for women, made gender a documented problem for Indian social science before it became a theoretical one, and exposed the silences of village studies, kinship theory and stratification analysis. The second was institutional: the National Policy on Education of 1986 and the university women's studies centres that followed converted movement urgency into syllabi, journals and posts, securing the field while binding it to state funding. The third was intersectional, and it was not borrowed. Dalit feminist scholarship, drawing on a Phule–Ambedkarite lineage, contested the unmarked upper-caste subject of earlier writing, while vernacular and regional research unsettled the metropolitan bias of the archive. India's route to intersectional analysis ran through caste, and this paper treats that route as a contribution to the concept rather than a local application of it.

A fourth redefinition is under way and remains unsettled. Scholarship on masculinities, on queer and transgender lives after the judicial shifts of 2014 and 2018, on care work, digital publics and climate-related displacement has widened the field precisely as restructuring under the National Education Policy 2020 absorbs autonomous centres into larger units. Drawing on curricula, doctoral output and journal debates, the paper asks what a discipline gains, and what it forfeits, when expansion and consolidation arrive together.

Keywords: Sociology of gender · Caste and gender · Intersectionality · Institutionalisation · Indian academy

1. INTRODUCTION

This seminar names the present as a moment of flux. The description holds, but flux has a longer history in this field than the framing suggests. The sociology of gender in India was born out of an unsettlement, and it has passed through three more since.

My argument can be stated plainly. Five decades of gender scholarship in India can be read as four successive redefinitions of what the field takes as its subject. None of them began with the arrival of a new theory. Each began with evidence that the existing categories could not absorb: a census series, a policy

instrument, a political conjuncture, and now a spread of objects that no longer sit inside the household. The categories failed first. Theory was rebuilt afterwards.

There is a rival account, and it is the more familiar one. In it, Indian gender studies receives liberal feminism in the 1970s, socialist feminism in the 1980s, intersectionality and poststructuralism in the 1990s, each with a decade's delay. The chronology can be made to fit. The causation cannot. The turn of the 1970s was set off by a government committee's tables, not by a reading list. The turn toward caste in the 1990s was under way before Crenshaw's vocabulary had entered many Indian departments, and it produced a structural argument that the metaphor of the crossroads does not itself supply. Reading the field as a recipient of concepts rather than a producer of them makes its actual history hard to follow.

The reconstruction below rests on three kinds of material. The published record — commission reports, monographs, and the periodical literature in the Economic and Political Weekly, the Indian Journal of Gender Studies, Contributions to Indian Sociology and Sociological Bulletin — shows what was argued. University syllabi and the University Grants Commission scheme documents show when an argument became a settled assumption, which is generally a decade later. Doctoral titles show where the research effort actually went, since a thesis topic is chosen under supervision and within a department's means. All three share one distortion: they are overwhelmingly in English, and the field's English record underrepresents work done and taught in Marathi, Tamil, Bangla, Malayalam and Hindi. Section 4 argues that this is not an inconvenience but one of the substantive findings of the period it describes.

2. COUNTING WOMEN: THE EMPIRICAL REDEFINITION, 1974–1985

The Committee on the Status of Women in India was appointed in 1971, chaired by Phulrenu Guha with Vina Mazumdar as Member-Secretary, and asked to review the constitutional and legal provisions affecting women and assess their impact. Briefs of this kind usually produce documents nobody reads.

Towards Equality, submitted at the end of 1974, did not. The Committee found that on measurable indicators the position of Indian women had not improved since Independence and had in several respects worsened. The sex ratio had continued its century-long decline. Recorded female work participation had fallen. The absolute gap between male and female literacy had widened even as literacy rose for both. Excess female mortality in several age cohorts had no biological explanation. Its members had expected to document progress and found its opposite, which is part of why the report carried the weight it did.

The intellectual consequence was uncomfortable for social science. One proposition underwrote both the planning apparatus and much of Indian sociology: that legal equality plus growth would in time produce social equality between men and women. If the direction of travel was wrong after twenty-five years of both, then women's subordination was not a residue of tradition waiting for modernity to dissolve it. Something was reproducing it, and in places sharpening it. That is a sociological claim, and a statistical series forced it on the discipline.

The report also worked, without meaning to, as an audit of Indian sociology. Why had nobody noticed? The answer lay in how the discipline's three main enterprises were built. Village studies took the household as the elementary unit of analysis. Households had a caste, a landholding, an occupation and a rank; what they did not have was an interior. Nutrition, schooling, mobility and decision-making were attributed to the household entire, which made any distribution inside it invisible by construction. Sanskritisation illustrates the cost. Emulation of upper-caste practice by mobile groups characteristically meant withdrawing women from paid work and tightening restrictions on their movement and remarriage:

mobility for the group, constraint for its women. The concept had circulated for two decades before that implication was drawn.

Kinship theory had the reverse difficulty. Women filled it — as wives given and taken, as the points through which descent ran — and for that reason appeared in it only as material. Irawati Karve's regional mapping and the structuralist accounts that followed produced a rich formal grammar of marriage without asking what the rules cost the people being moved through them. Leela Dube turned kinship from a field in which women were described into one in which gender could be explained. Her account of the seed-and-earth pairing, in which the man supplies form and the woman a receptive field, traced how a single metaphor running through ritual, law and ordinary speech underwrote patrilineal descent, unequal inheritance and the policing of female sexuality. Her later comparative work established that these arrangements followed from particular kinship structures rather than from culture in general, which is what made them explicable.

Stratification analysis, the third enterprise, ran on caste and class, both understood to pass through the family. The family therefore sat at the base of the pyramid as an unmarked given rather than as a structure with its own distributive politics. This silence has had the longest life. It also held the material for the field's most original theoretical contribution, since no account of how a caste order reproduces itself across generations can avoid the question of control over women's sexuality. The question was available in 1974. It was pressed in 1993.

What distinguishes the decade is how quickly the finding acquired an address. The Research Centre for Women's Studies at SNDT opened in 1974 under Neera Desai; the Centre for Women's Development Studies followed in 1980; the first national conference on women's studies, held in Bombay in 1981, produced the Indian Association for Women's Studies a year later. These beginnings marked everything after. The field started outside conventional departments, in centres. It started from a policy question rather than a theoretical one. And it started in close contact with a women's movement then mobilising around dowry deaths and custodial rape. Each was a strength; each left a trace. The empirical origin gave Indian gender research a durable seriousness about data and a certain impatience with theory. It also left the field with a singular subject, the Indian woman, which a national argument required and which came apart within twenty years.

3. SYLLABI AND POSTS: THE INSTITUTIONAL REDEFINITION, 1986–1996

The National Policy on Education of 1986 committed the education system to an interventionist role in changing the status of women. Read now the sentence is unremarkable; read as an instrument it was decisive. It gave women's studies a claim on the higher education budget that did not depend on the sympathies of any particular vice-chancellor.

The University Grants Commission scheme for women's studies centres followed, beginning in the Seventh Plan with a handful of universities and reaching well over a hundred and fifty centres by the Twelfth. The field's public infrastructure consolidated alongside it: the Economic and Political Weekly began its Review of Women's Studies in 1986, the Indian Journal of Gender Studies appeared in 1994, and the Mahila Samakhya programme from 1988 kept a working channel open between university research and field mobilisation. The second redefinition was not a change in what gender scholars believed. It was a change in what the field was: an apparatus with posts, syllabi, examination structures, doctoral pipelines and a budget line, rather than a body of argument sustained by committed individuals.

The decade's central internal argument concerned a word. Should the field be women's studies or gender studies? It is usually recalled as terminological fussiness, which it was not. 'Gender' was the better analytic term: it named a relation rather than a population and made masculinity a construction rather than an unmarked default. 'Women' was the better political one: the centres existed because a movement had argued that women's subordination was a public problem, and the more abstract word could be endorsed by any administrator at no cost. Underneath ran a reasonable fear that a field newly dependent on state funding would find the comfortable term irresistible. Most centres settled on hybrid names, and the compromise survives in university nomenclature. The question underneath it — how much analytic breadth can be bought before the political referent goes missing — has never been settled, and Section 5 shows it returning.

The same years saw the field reach backwards. *Recasting Women* in 1989, and the *Women Writing in India* volumes soon after, reopened the nineteenth-century 'woman question' and showed the reform debates over sati, widow remarriage and age of consent to have been arguments among men about the nation, conducted over women's bodies. The nationalist settlement that assigned women to a spiritual inner domain, in exchange for a modernity confined to work and politics, was shown to have produced a specific model of respectable Indian femininity. For sociology this made the present historical: much of what village studies had recorded as tradition turned out to be a nineteenth-century construction with a datable origin.

Institutionalisation secured the field and tied it down, and accounts of the period tend to report only one half. The security was real, and a generation could build careers without justifying their subject each time. The constraint was structural. Funding came through a central scheme on plan cycles, so intellectual agendas had to be phrased in the vocabulary of grant renewal. Staffing was often contractual and directorships frequently held on deputation, so centres accumulated less permanent faculty than their output implied. And the field's policy fluency was at once its most useful asset and a standing invitation to let the state set the questions. Where funding depends on demonstrating utility to a government, sustained criticism of that government's development model becomes professionally expensive. Much of the best work of the following decade was written by people who paid that price.

4. CASTE AS METHOD: THE INTERSECTIONAL REDEFINITION

The singular 'Indian woman' broke in the early 1990s, and politics rather than theory broke it. The implementation of the Mandal recommendations in 1990 brought upper-caste women onto the streets in defence of merit and, in the protest imagery reproduced everywhere at the time, of their own marriage prospects. Two years later the demolition at Ayodhya followed a decade in which Hindu nationalism had recruited women as a constituency and given them public, militant, unmistakably female voices. Neither could be narrated within a framework in which women shared a political subject and common interests. Upper-caste women were acting as upper-caste; Hindu nationalist women as Hindu nationalists. The category the field had been using turned out to be a position — upper-caste, Hindu, urban, English-educated, middle-class — that had been passing as the general case.

Uma Chakravarti's 1993 argument on Brahmanical patriarchy supplied the theoretical response, and it is cited more often than it is used. Its structure runs as follows. A caste order reproduces itself through endogamy, and caste boundaries hold only if marriage stays inside them across generations. Since caste passes by birth, the integrity of the boundary depends on certainty about paternity, and therefore on control over women's sexuality: early marriage, restricted movement, prohibition of widow remarriage, sanctions

against intercaste unions, and a graded ideology of purity that presents all of this as virtue. Control over women is thus the mechanism by which caste reproduces itself, not a cultural accompaniment to it. And because purity is graded, the seclusion that marks upper-caste respectability presupposes the labouring, publicly visible, sexually vulnerable Dalit woman against whom that respectability is defined.

This is a claim about co-constitution rather than accumulation. It does not say that two oppressions add together at the bottom. It says neither structure can be described accurately without the other, because each supplies the other's conditions of operation. The date is worth registering. The argument was made in an Indian journal, from Indian historical and ethnographic material, at roughly the moment intersectionality was being elaborated in American legal scholarship from American case law, and by an entirely separate route.

The second front was epistemological. Gopal Guru argued in 1995 that Dalit women had a distinct claim to speak for themselves, arising from subordination structured at once by an external patriarchy operating from dominant castes and an internal one operating within their own communities. Sharmila Rege's elaboration three years later turned this into a method. Her central move was to hold that a Dalit feminist standpoint is not the private property of Dalit women but a critical position that non-Dalit scholars are obliged to occupy and think from — a reconstruction of the field's vantage point, not the addition of a constituency to an existing frame. Her later work on testimonio treated Dalit women's life narratives as theory rather than as data awaiting interpretation elsewhere.

The lineage here predates the encounter with Anglo-American feminism by a century. Jotirao Phule's writing from the 1870s tied caste subordination to the denial of education and to the condition of women, and the schools he and Savitribai Phule ran made the link practical. Ambedkar's analysis of caste as an enclosed unit maintained by controls on marriage — endogamy, the problem of the surplus woman, sati and enforced widowhood as devices for managing it — supplies the structural argument restated above. The Hindu Code Bill campaign, and his resignation over its defeat, put family law at the centre of an anti-caste programme. Organisational work ran alongside the scholarship: the National Federation of Dalit Women was founded in 1995, Dalit women's organisations were visible at Beijing the same year, and the campaign to have caste recognised as a form of discrimination reached international forums at the turn of the decade.

The redefinition had a linguistic and geographic edge that belongs with the caste argument rather than beside it. Dalit women's autobiographical writing in Marathi and Tamil from the 1980s — Baby Kamble on Mahar community life, Bama's *Karukku*, the memoirs of a first-educated generation — amounted to social analysis with no place in an archive organised around English monographs. Regional research did the same to the field's geography. Studies of matriliney and its dismantling in Kerala complicated any single story of Indian patriarchy. Work on land, honour and marriage in Haryana produced an account of dominant-caste masculinity and of unmarried men in a region of adverse sex ratios that generalises from nowhere else. Research in the north-east on customary law and on women's exclusion from village councils, in societies with relatively high female literacy and mobility, described configurations the field's vocabulary actively misdescribed. The finding took the same shape each time: what had been offered as gender in India was gender in one region, class and caste location.

The claim here should not be mistaken for a nationalist one. It is not that Indian scholarship arrived first, or that the American formulation is derivative. It is that two traditions working on different structures with different materials reached compatible conclusions, and that the Indian route yields something the other does not, namely a mechanism. The crossroads metaphor describes powerfully how a legal system fails

people injured at the intersection of two protected categories. It does not by itself explain why two axes of domination should be entangled rather than merely concurrent. The caste analysis does: endogamy is the reproductive requirement that makes control over women constitutive of caste. That explanation travels, since any order reproducing itself through inherited group membership faces the same requirement.

Two costs should be recorded. Caste has been added to the field's subject matter more successfully than adopted as its method; a great deal of research names it as a variable and disaggregates findings by it without rebuilding its frame around co-constitution, which is the move Rege warned against. And success on one front has coincided with thinness on others. Work on Adivasi women, on Muslim women outside the recurring controversy over personal law, and on disability and gender remains sparse against the scale of the populations concerned, and doctoral output shows the imbalance more sharply than the journals do.

5. THE UNFINISHED FOURTH REDEFINITION, 2010–2024

The fourth redefinition differs in kind. Each of the first three turned on a hinge: a report, a policy, a conjuncture with a theoretical intervention attached. This one has no single hinge. It is a simultaneous widening on several fronts, occurring while the institutional settlement that has carried the field since 1986 is taken apart.

Men have become visible. For most of the field's history they appeared as context — husbands, perpetrators, holders of the resources being unequally distributed. Since the mid-2000s Indian work has treated masculinity as a construction requiring explanation: how dominant-caste masculinity is produced and maintained, what agrarian distress does to male identity, what follows in regions where adverse sex ratios leave large cohorts of men unable to marry, and how the enforcement of endogamy operates through masculine networks of surveillance and violence. The Delhi gang rape of December 2012 and the Justice Verma Committee report that followed worked as a professional hinge. Public argument swung between individual pathology and cultural essence, and neither is sociological. The demand for a structural account — of how sexual violence is produced by particular arrangements of caste, urban space, policing, migration and masculine peer culture — moved masculinity toward the centre of the field. It also exposed how differently that demand is answered depending on the caste of the accused, a point Dalit feminist scholarship pressed at the time.

Law has moved faster than the discipline. In 2014 the Supreme Court recognised the right to self-identified gender; in 2018 it read down Section 377. The transgender rights legislation that followed, and the Court's 2023 refusal to recognise same-sex marriage, mark the limits of the shift as clearly as the judgments mark its reach. Scholarship had preceded the law: the recovery of same-sex desire in Indian textual traditions, ethnographies of hijra communities and of the shifting relation between vernacular categories such as kothi and thirunangai and an internationally circulating LGBT vocabulary, and analyses of how HIV-prevention funding reshaped sexual identity categories. What the judgments changed was the field's obligation, and it is being met unevenly. The core of Indian sociology — the family, marriage, kinship and inheritance chapters every undergraduate meets — was built on heterosexual conjugality and has not been rewritten. Queer scholarship sits largely elsewhere, in literature, law and cultural studies. Doctoral work on transgender lives has grown from almost nothing but concentrates in social work and public health, where the framing is vulnerability and service delivery rather than kinship, property and social structure. This redefinition has been announced rather than completed.

Care has returned the field to political economy. National time-use data has documented what feminist economists long argued: that women perform the overwhelming share of unpaid domestic and caregiving work, that the resulting time poverty constrains everything else, and that a national accounting system excluding it misdescribes the economy. The associated puzzle is among the sharpest in Indian social science. Female labour force participation fell over a period in which female education rose, fertility declined and incomes grew, reversing what standard models predict. Every candidate explanation is sociological: withdrawal from paid work as a status marker as incomes rise, mechanisation of operations that had been women's work, the absence of the manufacturing employment that absorbed women elsewhere in Asia, measurement conventions that misclassify unpaid family labour, and the weight of care itself. Recent increases in recorded participation have opened a further argument over whether they represent real expansion or a mix of definitional change and distress-driven self-employment.

Digital publics have changed the field's relation to its audience. The anonymously sourced list of academics accused of harassment that circulated in 2017, and the testimony that followed in 2018, produced an open split. On one side stood a position committed to due process and the institutional complaints machinery built over decades of campaigning; on the other a younger politics arguing that this machinery had reliably protected the powerful and that anonymous testimony was a rational response to its failure. The exchange took place on platforms, which is the point: its form was inseparable from its medium. Sociology has barely begun on the questions that follow. Whether a platform structured by engagement metrics is a public sphere in any useful sense; how the gender gap in mobile and internet access, visible in national health survey data, determines who can enter such publics at all; and how online harassment works to push women, and particularly Dalit, Muslim and queer women, out of public speech. The newest front is environmental. Research in the Sundarbans and other exposed regions has documented the gendered structure of climate displacement: male out-migration leaving women to manage land, debt and dependents without title or recognition; lengthening water and fuel collection times; heat exposure among women in outdoor and informal work; and specific vulnerabilities in relief and resettlement. The established literature on women's land rights supplies the frame, since title determines access to compensation, credit and rehabilitation. This reconnects gender research to agrarian studies and environmental sociology, and is likely to be the growth area of the coming decade.

All of this coincides with the dismantling of the 1986 settlement. The National Education Policy 2020 is organised around large multidisciplinary institutions, the reorganisation of departments into broader schools, and the consolidation of specialised units. For autonomous women's studies centres the consequence has been the loss of a distinct institutional identity — through absorption into larger social science schools, through the folding of centre functions into general equity and grievance cells with an administrative rather than a research mandate, and through the restructuring of the dedicated funding line that sustained them.

The case for consolidation is not frivolous. Some centres had gone dormant, duplication existed, and the argument for running gender analysis across the curriculum rather than quarantining it in one unit was made by feminist scholars long before it reached a policy document. But mainstreaming a perspective is not the same as dissolving the base from which it can be argued for. A centre with a budget, a director and a doctoral programme can insist that a gender question be asked in a department that would rather not ask it. An equity cell cannot; its mandate is to process complaints, not to produce knowledge. That distinction decides whether a field keeps the capacity to set its own questions. It is the paradox this seminar names:

the field's object has never been wider, and its institutional footing has not been this uncertain since before 1986.

6. GAINS, FORFEITS, AND WHAT FOLLOWS

A ledger is in order. On the credit side, the widening has given the field a reach the founding generation would have counted as vindication. Gender is no longer a topic within Indian sociology but an axis along which its central objects — family, caste, labour, migration, urbanism, the state — are being rethought. The field has produced at least one theoretical contribution of general significance in the caste–gender argument, and it commands a methodological range from national statistical analysis through village ethnography to testimonio that few subfields can match. The entry of masculinity and of queer and trans lives has closed a gap that left the field open to the charge of studying half of a relation it insisted was relational.

Four costs sit on the other side. The first is the loss of a defensible perimeter: a field whose object includes climate displacement, digital publics, care economics, masculinity, sexuality, caste and law can be told in any faculty meeting that its concerns are handled adequately elsewhere. Breadth is an intellectual asset and an institutional liability at once. The second is the conversion of a critical field into an administrative function; when a centre becomes a cell its output shifts from research to compliance, and the change is generally announced in the language of mainstreaming. The third is the unresolved language problem. Three decades after the field established that a monolingual archive distorts the account, the incentive structure of academic careers rewards English publication in indexed journals, pushing directly against its own finding. The fourth is generational: contractual staffing and short project cycles produce scholars who cannot plan a ten-year programme, and each of the three completed redefinitions was the work of people who could.

Two things follow. The field should make its own institutional history an object of study rather than a background — tracing how scheme guidelines, funding cycles, syllabus committees and journal editorships have shaped what counts as knowledge. It has applied these tools to every institution except itself. And it should recognise which of its assets are durable. Centres can be merged and schemes discontinued; what survived earlier consolidations were the journal, the biennial conference and the syllabus that a hundred boards of studies had already approved. Those are the load-bearing structures, and they are worth defending as such.

Five decades, four redefinitions, one recurring pattern. Evidence appeared that the working categories could not hold: census tables showing the wrong direction of travel; a policy instrument that turned an argument into an institution; a conjuncture that revealed a universal subject to be a particular one; and now a set of objects that will not fit a framework built around women in households. In each case the categories broke first and theory was rebuilt after. That order is the field's distinguishing characteristic and its strongest claim to have produced knowledge rather than received it.

The fourth redefinition is not finished, and this paper does not pretend to close it. Its outcome turns on two things only partly within the field's control: whether the widening consolidates into a teachable core or scatters into loosely related specialisms, and whether an institutional base survives the current restructuring in a form that can sustain independent research agendas. The first is an intellectual question the field can answer. The second is a political one it can only argue about, which is a reason to argue about it clearly and in public. What the history offers for that argument is a record of unusual seriousness — a field that has repeatedly found its own central category inadequate and treated the discovery as a finding

rather than an embarrassment. It did so in 1974, when the assumption that development would deliver equality collapsed against the census. It did so in the 1990s, when its own subject turned out to have a caste. Flux, on this reading, is not the field's crisis but its method.

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