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Learning through Teaching the 'Sociology of Gender'

MAITRAYEE CHAUDHURI

This paper reflects on the experience of teaching a course on women and society in a sociology department over a period of seven years. This is discussed from different angles—related to sociology and its disciplinary location; questions of women's studies and feminist politics; and the complex dimensions of pedagogy in particular. The diversity amongst students and the politics of the classroom repeatedly emerge as critical issues in the paper. The essay concludes with some theoretical reflections on the problems of relating experience with analysis by drawing on the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel.

The Setting

This paper offers some scattered reflections on the teaching of women's studies within higher education by drawing from my concrete experiences as a teacher of sociology in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. More specifically, I taught a course entitled 'Women and Society in India: A Comparative Perspective' within the MA programme for sociology in the Centre for the Study of Social Systems in JNU for about seven years at a stretch. Since I am not teaching the course at present, this is an opportunity to look back and gauge my own learning process over the years when I was fully involved with the course. Speaking and lecturing on gender-related issues on other specific occasions has also offered particular challenges and insights, from which I will also be drawing in the course of this paper.

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Maitrayee Chaudhuri is Associate Professor, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi 110 067. E-mail: maitrayee1@yahoo.com.

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In a very real sense I 'inherited' the course from Patricia Uberoi, who introduced the course in the mid-1980s, at a time when nothing of its kind existed anywhere in the university system.¹ In her own valuable account of designing and struggling to introduce a course on women and gender, Uberoi has emphasised the extent of the invisibility of women in the sociology syllabus. It was not simply that when she joined the centre in 1985–86 there were no compulsory or optional courses in women's studies, but that there was also no evidence that a women's 'component' or 'perspective' was being conscientiously introduced into any of our compulsory papers, either in areas such as anthropological theory, family and kinship, economy and society, political sociology or social stratification—all of which are currently areas of feminist reinterpretations—let alone any sensitivity to feminist critiques of the founding fathers of the discipline, Marx and Weber in particular, or to new feminist applications of their sociological insights (Uberoi 1989–90: 279).

The last decade or more has seen a steady building up of gender studies, which is now one of the thrust areas of the centre. The high visibility of gender in the centre—whether in terms of dissertations submitted by students, research papers published by faculty members or as themes for seminars—cannot be overemphasised. It would not be too much to claim that the early initiation of courses on gender has therefore had a snowballing effect. While wishing to explicitly acknowledge these positive developments, the focus of this paper is somewhat different and has to do with the specific challenges and difficulties I experienced as a *teacher*. In the process I also hope to open up to further exploration some of the theoretical resources within the discipline of sociology for addressing the pedagogical problems I encountered.

I entered the Centre early in 1990 when the course on 'Women and Society in India' was already well established, with a number of committed students and a more general but definite air of interest in this course. The subsequent years of teaching and involvement on my part can perhaps best be discussed from the following angles: (a) observations about the standing of the course within the sociology centre where I am located and within the discipline of sociology more generally; (b) related issues of what ought to be taught within the course—questions of both disciplinarity as well as the politics of feminism, which include the relationship between women's studies and the women's movement, as well as questions of naming—whether such a course ought to fall within the rubric of women's studies or gender studies; and (c) the actual mode of teaching, that is, pedagogical issues of communication, negotiations between the private and public, and—most importantly—the relationship between experience and analysis. For these reasons the context of the classroom has repeatedly emerged as a critical site, most of the lessons I learnt stemmed from the actual process of interacting with students.

Locating the Course within the Centre and the Discipline of Sociology

The department of sociology where I teach has indeed come a long way since 1985, the time when, as Patricia Uberoi had recalled, there was no evidence of either 'a women's component' or a 'perspective'. In a preliminary note introducing the course circulated to the students as late as 1999, I wrote the following:

A decade ago when this course was first offered, it was a significant step towards affording a formal space within the academia for studies of women and society in India. The area could not have been wider. For everything literally can be accommodated within this space. But everything cannot be reasonably covered and the danger of the spread being too thin was real. This is particularly so because world wide social sciences have talked about the world of men when they were supposedly talking about society, culture, economics and politics. Students in sociology for example have to complete 16 courses for their M.A. programme, many of which are substantive courses on India. A course on economy and society or stratification therefore ought to be studies about both men and women. Happily for our centre, the last decade has seen a concerted effort to redress this.

By the mid-1990s, teachers of many regular sociology courses had added a component on women. A range of compulsory courses on stratification, polity and society in India, economy and society in India, methodology of social sciences, family and kinship in India, and sociological theories were thus modified. This had a direct effect on the restructuring of the course on 'Women and Society in India'. Specific readings or themes covered in other papers could now be left out. I found this quite welcome, given the virtually unlimited and therefore impossibly wide scope of a course on women and society in India.

No organised debate or discussion within the Centre preceded a particular individual teacher's decision to introduce a component on gender into his or her courses. This can partly be explained by the flexibility and autonomy that a teacher has within the Jawaharlal Nehru University. But I still find it significant, for teachers do function within an overall structure of accountability to one another and, had there been opposition, no additions of a gender component would have been possible. On the face of it, this suggests two things. First, there appears to have been an unspoken consensus that women's studies is a *mainstream* field and can therefore be made mandatory. Second, one might infer that there was *no resistance* to adding gender. Both are, I think, only half-truths, and hide at least as much as they reveal.

I do think that gender studies has been sufficiently mainstreamed to be added as a theme in sociology seminars, a chapter in a book or a topic in the reading list of a mainstream course.² But much of this is of the 'add and stir' approach that does not involve any serious interrogation of the theory and methods of sociology. While gender as a variable has gained acceptance, as a perspective it would involve a lot more rethinking. I recall an incident at an interview board where a male teacher queried a woman candidate working on development and gender as to whether she was going to adopt a feminist perspective or would just look at how women were affected. This example indicates how differently the frameworks for introducing the study of women in our department were understood by members of the faculty.

While 'gender' or 'women' found their way into courses and were readily added to the list, a sociologist doing primarily women's studies was deemed less than a mainstream sociologist. I have referred to this asymmetry as a problem of *machismo* and differential prestige in the course of reviewing an American volume on the feminist foundations of sociology (Myers et al. 1998):

Many who are women and chose 'women studies' would understand this matter of *machismo* and differential prestige. I have often been advised to do other things besides 'women' if I had any plans of being taken seriously. I have been asked at interviews whether my specialization placed me at a disadvantage equipped as I was with partial lenses. As Toni M. Calasanti puts it she was 'warned about the dangers of not publishing in "real", sociology journals about "real" sociological issues if she wanted to receive tenure'. (Chaudhuri 1999: 30)

The notion that 'women's studies' is merely 'partial' is widely held. The concomitant notion, of course, is that other courses or perspectives are not. I can only speculate upon the kinds of opposition scholars of women's studies have faced in American universities. It is difficult to make general comparisons, especially since there are so many differences *between* Indian universities. However, I would still hazard the claim that Indian universities are 'softer' as compared to American ones, whether on the terrain of Marxism or feminism. It would take me well beyond the purview of this paper to discuss the different histories of nations and institutions, and their consequences for what 'soft' might mean for a particular discipline or field of study. The only point I wish to make here is that although on the face of it no objections have been raised to proposals for the introduction of women's studies, or for adding components or readings to courses in a university like JNU, resistance and hostility are nonetheless present—they are expressed differently. In other words, the inclusion of a gender component cannot be taken for granted, and the struggle for 'visibility' that

marked the early years of women's studies is by no means over yet. The reason why I am emphasising this is because it is not enough to recognise that feminist scholarship in India has made great headway and even won international acclaim. We have to come to terms with the fact that the dissemination of feminist scholarship has been very uneven within the country. In JNU one finds a mix of students ranging from the leading colleges of India's premier metropolitan cities to first-generation learners from some of the most remote backward districts of the country. This has to be addressed as a social fact in any approach for teaching the sociology of gender, a point I shall return to repeatedly in the course of this paper.

What Ought to be Taught

Questions of 'ought' are always difficult to answer. For the criterion by which the 'ought' is judged is itself under scrutiny. In designing the course on women and society in India in the early years I often felt weighed down by the dictates of two contending 'taskmasters'. The first was the growing corpus of literature on women's studies, both internationally and in India. The second related to questions of disciplinarity and what ought to be taught as women's studies in a department of sociology. The latter question was more easily resolved in my case. This is because JNU has been premised on and institutionally structured from an explicitly interdisciplinary perspective. The founders of my Centre (as departments in JNU are referred to) called it the Centre for the Study of Social Systems (located in the School of Social Sciences) rather than a Centre of Sociology. Indeed, a large number of students who opted for this course came from different centres and therefore brought different disciplinary backgrounds with them. But the first question of what one ought to teach within the rapidly growing corpus of literature on women's studies and feminism remained a vexing problem. Like Patricia Uberoi before me, I found it difficult to avoid a 'natural' dichotomisation of the course into two sections: the 'theoretical' part had no Indian names, and the 'comparative' section was well represented by Indian scholars. The assumption therefore seemed to be that once we had familiarised ourselves with the theoretical debates of the West we could turn our attention to applying them to our own empirical realities.

I did not begin the course with the well-worn classification of feminist theoretical approaches into liberal, radical and socialist feminist. My decision to avoid such an entry point was deliberate and yet my reasons for doing so were not very clear even to myself at the time. Let me therefore make an attempt to spell them out here, with the benefit of hindsight. One reason could have been that I anticipated the predictable response, namely, that this only proved the Westernness of feminist theory. I wished to steer clear from both this blanket wariness towards Western feminism as well

as counter-claims regarding the glorious status of women in ancient India. I therefore focused on our own history as an erstwhile colonial society, the centrality of the women's question in our nationalist discourse, the history of women's activism and organisations, and the ambiguous relationship that we have had with Western ideas and theories. Second, I felt that such a narration of feminism was but one of many possible ways of telling the story, though the mandatory overview of the three central strands may have acquired a sanctity of its own by the way it has been taught in the West and institutionalised in books on feminism.

My readings were made up of: (a) a mix of theoretical orientations; (b) some reviews of feminist interrogations of the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology; (c) a reassessment of categories that sociology students are familiar with, like family, kinship, marriage, and some which they are not so familiar with, such as the state; (d) the political economy of gender; and (e) women and development. Clearly, such themes are selective and skewed in certain directions. Other dimensions and themes such as the cultural construction of gender, the female body and gender identity were not seriously taken up. My lack of training and my own interests were responsible for this. I blamed myself a little less knowing that the M.Phil. course taught by another colleague of mine did address these themes. But the larger issue of what constitutes the 'right' readings and what combinations are 'more' or 'less' feminist is not so easily resolved.

There was a third 'taskmaster', namely, my students, who came to the course with a wide and varying set of expectations. Some students felt that there ought to be a greater emphasis on theoretical orientations, others favoured the cultural construction of gender and still others felt that what was really relevant was the role of women in development. My own attempts have been eclectic. I have tried different combinations for different batches.

The point is not that one has to cater to each and every expectation, nor whether they were justified in having them. Rather, as a sociologist interested in understanding the making of a gendered social world, this interaction itself afforded me rich possibilities of learning. The question I am trying to address here is therefore not whether it is more legitimate for students to expect being taught about women in development or about the cultural construction of sexuality or about whether I err theoretically in making such a dichotomy in the first place. My concern has to do with the sociological realities within which these anticipations occur. There are two aspects here—the social composition of students and their varying academic and political preparedness for this course in particular, and for tackling questions of feminism more generally.

The other issue that I wish to take up relates more directly to pedagogic questions and to my own efforts to make connections between the personal

and the public. This has been as much a theme within sociology, as discussed in C. Wright Mill's *The Sociological Imagination*, as it has been central to certain perspectives on feminist pedagogy. My efforts in this regard worked in some ways and did not in others. It worked when students got involved, could connect. It did not when there was a reluctance to shift ground from the personal to the public, from the personal to the theoretical and to the political. Or if they did shift ground the connection was lost. I will elaborate on this in the final section.

The Classroom

When I started teaching the course in 1993 there was a great deal of enthusiasm that often verged on a tangible sense of excitement, which appeared to stem from the actual possibility of discussing things in a classroom that students thought were outside the purview of academic interest and legitimacy. Though it was an optional course, a large number of students signed up for it. I should stress that in the initial years there were as many boys as girls, and much of the fun stemmed from the exchanges between the male and female students. As for the broader social composition of the class that I have already alluded to before, JNU has, over the years, attracted a large section of female students from urban, middle-class, upper-caste backgrounds while a sizeable section of male students tend to come from smaller towns, or from rural and comparatively less privileged backgrounds. Therefore, exchanges between the male and female students cannot be adequately addressed through the lens of gender alone, but were often fraught with undercurrents stemming from these social facts of class and caste.

In the early years the course was new and expectations ranged from the serious to the trivial, and in some cases extended to the voyeuristic. During the last two years I noticed a sharp decline in the number of male students. The last batch I taught was almost entirely composed of women, with the exception of a few men known to be 'different'. But over the years it is not just the gender composition that has changed. Expectations have become more grounded within some familiarity with feminism. And, more recently still, I discern the entry of a definite professionalism in students' interest in gender studies. In the early years a typical response to the question 'What did you expect in this course?' would go something like this:³

Something light, something, which does not involve too much reading. Frankly we didn't think that we would have to read Margaret Mead.

We thought there would be more of a dialogue, a kind of exchange of views between girls and boys.

In the last three years a more typical response has been:

We will learn about patriarchy and feminist theory.
We want to know something more about the women's movement.

And now:

A lot of NGOs and international organisations want specialisation in gender and development issues.

I was amazed at the changes that were evident in student responses over the span of merely seven years. In the actual teaching of the course, while I did emphasise *the symbiotic relationship between feminist ideas and movements*, this theme was not strongly foregrounded to begin with. Other experiences outside the classroom suggested that such a beginning was not always well received and could block engagement at the very outset. I preferred to allow the theme to emerge from the class, and then intervene. Questions concerning the relationship between the women's movement and women's studies always surfaced in the classroom. Let me cite from some of the statements students made that obliquely touch upon this relationship:

We become aware of various issues but awareness does not entail change . . .

We have courses on Marxism. We read Marxism. That does not entail that we have to be Marxist. We can therefore take a course on feminism, read on feminism but not be feminist . . .

I think 'gender' is a far better word than women. It is much more objective and clinical . . .

What is the point of this course? All the girls are taking it and all are going to have arranged marriages . . .

Neither the movement nor feminism is of any relevance to India. The large mass of people are unaffected by some urban groups who talk about feminism.

At least two views are finding expression here. Some saw the link between women's studies and feminist politics positively, others did not. Some believed that taking this course ought to imply a change in attitude. Others saw this as no different from other courses. Many found the term 'gender studies' less offensive. Though students understood that women's studies had links with the women's movement, what was also discernible over the years was a certain routinisation and professionalisation of women's studies. The critical issue is not that it ought not to become more

mainstream, but whether an emptying of its political charge is a necessary corollary of this process.

There are further dimensions to students' varying expectations from the course. Even in the initial years there was always a small group of students who were already initiated into some feminist theory. With them I found a curious reluctance to address empirical or even broadly historical themes. They wanted high feminist theory and were extremely impatient with students who wanted to talk about, say, the problems of rural women or the anti-arrack movements. On one occasion I had about three women students from the adjoining history centre where a course on 'resistance' was being offered. Their interest lay in redefining conventional frameworks for approaching social movements by addressing forms of everyday resistance. The examples of such resistance that they mentioned included 'kitty parties', 'female gossip' and 'specific rites'. This left other students baffled who had come with more obvious and self-evident notions of 'oppression', 'exploitation' and 'social evils'. But this is not to deny significant positive developments during this period.⁴ For instance, Patricia Uberoi had noted the resistance to discussions on compulsory heterosexuality during her years of teaching. What has changed since then is greater familiarity and again greater willingness on the part of some to address it.⁵

In other words, students brought different demands and challenges to the women's studies classroom. First of all, there were conflicts and tensions produced by the cross-cutting effects of gender with class, caste and regional backgrounds. Most women students were from a more privileged background, from English-speaking schools, and most of the men were not. Second, since some of these women students were also visible as feminists in the university, this seemed to suggest that feminism was really the prerogative of privileged women. Third, while a majority of the students were innocent of any nuanced understanding of gender studies, a few of them—usually the more articulate ones—already had a brush with feminist theory. This diversity in composition coupled with the uneven preparedness to undertake a course on gender studies therefore created problems of where to 'pitch' the lectures. Fourth, this diversity was compounded further by the different disciplinary backgrounds of those students who were more 'prepared'. The case of the history students just mentioned is one example. Students from English literature trained in textual analysis from a feminist perspective and often with fairly sophisticated skills were, however, almost completely wanting in sociological perspectives. During the entire seven-year period when I taught the course I had just one economics student (she was Polish, married to an American). A few were from political science, and were a disparate lot, unlike the students from history or literature. I have had students interested in political theory, and others interested in questions of voting patterns and reservations.

Overall, I was faced with two broad challenges from the students—the diversity in their social backgrounds and their disciplinary training. Both were uneven. While some had been exposed at a prior stage to feminist theories (in their undergraduate colleges), others had stereotypical images of feminists as eccentric, cigarette-smoking, elite women. Trying to cater to both these groups simultaneously within the precincts of one classroom therefore had its share of difficulties. Illustrating the distinction between ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ could evoke a range of responses from a bored ‘this is old stuff’ (and what about Judith Butler?) to shocked disbelief that ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ could possibly be different. Like other democratic ideas, feminist concepts have travelled and been received differently and differentially across sections and regions in India.

Just to be Able to Speak

In the early years there was a great sense of excitement and an anticipation of the unexpected in the class. Students did not need to be prodded to come out with their stories—sundry accounts of gender discrimination, of what it meant to be ‘men’ or ‘women’. There were stories of grandmothers and cousins. And of themselves personally. ‘Speaking out’ has been an important feature of feminist method. It was also central in the second wave of feminism that emerged in the United States and Britain from the 1970s, which stressed the importance of consciousness-raising groups, considered crucial in bringing women together to ‘share experiences’, ‘to talk about their lives’ and thereby produce new kinds of ‘knowledge’ about those apparent commonalities (Gray 1997: 88). To invoke Betty Friedan’s (1963) portrait of women’s lives in suburbia in the United States in the 1950s who suffered from ‘the problem with no name’, women’s groups went about naming that problem. Friedan and the consciousness-raising groups that her work inspired were engaging in processes of knowledge production through the exploration of hitherto ‘unspeakable’ ways of being. Others would suggest that in Foucauldian terms, this involved the ‘naming’ of subjugated knowledges and the identification of dominant discourses working to delegitimise those knowledges. Yet others have argued that second-wave feminism in the West began relatively slowly to analyse and contest ‘science’, which had no place for ‘women’s shared experience’. It was the task of the movement to reclaim what had been denied or trivialised out of existence and return it to social and political existence. In the path-breaking years of the late 1960s and early 1970s ‘to consider housework, abortion, sexuality, love, birth control, motherhood and male violence as central issues was to work against the grain of an arrogant and naturalising masculinism’ (Rose 1994: 2). For Hilary Rose, naming—or conceptualising—has rightly been seen within feminism as empowerment, for when ‘words become part of the language of new historic subjects seeking to take their

place in society, [this] simultaneously contests hegemony and affirms a changed consciousness of reality' (ibid.: 2–3). The classroom offered such a space to speak about the hitherto unspoken. A student in my class wrote the very first day:

In India, where open sexual discussions are considered a taboo, it wouldn't be astonishing if I say I did not know what 'sex' or for that matter 'rape' meant until I was in class VIII. People wouldn't believe me or would laugh at me if I say I confused 'ragging' with 'raping'. It was really embarrassing to have gone and told my friend that my cousin's moustache was shaved off while he was raped in an engineering college. My friend was sweet enough to tell me not to confuse these words again, but she refused to tell me the meaning of 'rape' despite persuasion. When I went home and looked up a dictionary, it said, 'to have sexual intercourse without consent'. But since I couldn't grasp the meaning I asked my mother and she in turn conveniently left the matter saying, 'what strange things are you being taught?' This is generally what the case is, for parents think it is a taboo to discuss 'sex' with children. Gradually, I acquired knowledge on 'sex' from books, English movies, and even a chapter on Reproduction in class IX, and also as a corollary the meaning of 'rape' seeped in.

As it turns out, early feminism and contemporary feminism for that matter had difficulty with any objective definition of women's oppression and connection.

Class oppression could more or less be defined in terms of economics. Racial oppression could more or less be defined in terms of the treatment of people of a specific skin color. But women were scattered throughout both recognized oppressed and oppressor groups Eventually, feminists discarded the search for any 'objective' definition of women's oppression and settled on defining oppression differently—subjectively. As such, feminism began to rely centrally on *experience*. Women defined their own oppression as they experienced it—which also set up the basis for considering objectivity as a male value contrasted to subjectivity, a feminist or women's value. (Hopkins 1998: 47–48)

The upshot of all these problems, bluntly stated, is that women's subjective interpretation of their experiences cannot be the ground of feminist theory. As Judith Grant writes, this is 'for no other reason than that it is impossible to discern those experiences authentically, and that attempting to do so has resulted in the imputing of experiences to some imagined universal Woman or group of women' (cited in Hopkins 1998: 49). Joan Scott makes a parallel point about the use of 'experience' as authority in historical

research. She writes: 'Experience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political' (Scott 1992: 37). The other problem with relying on women's subjective experience as a ground and requisite for feminism, however, lies not merely in its conceptual coherence but also in its political efficacy and relevance for transforming society. Grant makes the point that: 'The test of a good feminist theory seems no longer to be, Will this help in the liberation of women? But rather, Does this reflect the female experience? These are two very different questions' (Grant 1993: 156–57).

The difficulties of an experience-based approach is of considerable relevance for feminist theorisation. In this paper I am more specifically concerned with its significance for exploring my teaching experiences in class. A central problem in my communication as a teacher pertains to a tendency to get mired at the level of common-sense discourse. Any piece of information, usually personal, experiential and therefore presumed to be of higher authenticity, could queer the pitch of a well-organised lecture. The persistence of this problem has bothered me and so I have sought over the years to work out some sociological explanation. I have no one answer but some possible tentative routes for looking at the problem, which may also shed some light on the tenacity of gender ideology.

Towards a Sociology of Experience

How should I organise the range of experiences that were constitutive of my learning process in the classroom? In an attempt to sort out the medley of impressions in my mind I will resort to a loose classification, whose provisional and tentative status I would be the first to emphasise. The initial response in almost all my encounters was *interest* and *excitement*. Whether this had to do with the *novelty* of the subject or the permission to speak on anything, such as the '*personal*' element, one cannot be sure. The second issue was that lectures usually entailed discussions that were sharply divided. If I felt encouraged initially and took these responses as signs of my success in arousing interest, it soon became obvious that most of the time this *sharply divided response* had very little to do with my lecture. It was a more generic response to both extant gender relations and to feminism as these were *already* understood. Some students would just wait for me to end in order to launch into a rehearsed speech. This experience was more true in the case of my occasional lectures (and was certainly not confined to students), but I cannot say that no such thing ever happened in the classroom. My interlocutors rarely felt the need to pay attention to the specific topic being addressed. It was about 'women', 'women's studies' and 'feminism', and this was enough to entitle them to speak with legitimacy about men and women. One might explain this simply as being due to

the poor state of our educational system, characterised as it is by a lack of both training and seriousness regarding any informed interrogation. As a general explanation, it cuts across disciplines, and so it would be wrong to suggest that this is an exclusive malaise for gender studies. A colleague of mine who spoke on tribal sociology was asked whether she knew Shibu Soren (the famous political tribal leader), and another who spoke on some specific aspect of international trade was asked about Pakistan's foreign policy.

But what aggravates such a trend in gender studies is the belief that *this field requires no expertise*, and that *any experience can count as good enough evidence and explanation*. Therefore there is no reason not to speak. The other explanation I can offer for the very sharp division of opinions is the existence of a *very marked antipathy towards attempts to critique and alter gender relations*. The existing gender system is considered natural and normative. It is part of the taken-for-granted reality that brooks no doubt. Theoretical traditions within sociology like phenomenology and ethno-methodology (important differences between them notwithstanding) have been concerned with the construction and sustenance of this common-sense world. I have found turning to these approaches fruitful in exploring the difficulty I faced within the classroom in shifting ground from experiential reality to the analytical level. Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, which differentiates between the attitude of the person immersed in daily life and notions of scientific theorising, has been a particularly useful resource.

For the person in daily life, events, their relationship, their causal textures are not matters of mere theoretic interest. He does not sanction the notion that in dealing with the events of his environment it is correct to address them with the interpretative rule that he knows nothing or that *all* of what he knows he knows only 'until further notice'. What he knows, the way he knows it, he assumes to be an integral feature of himself as a social object. He *sanctions* his competence as a bona-fide member of the group as a condition for adequately appreciating the sense of his everyday affairs; he does not treat this competence as irrelevant. (Garfinkel 1974: 63)

In the sociality of *scientific theorising*, however, the theoriser is outside of a role. 'All matters relevant to his depiction of a possible world are public and publicisable. It is difficult to see how one might shame the scientific theoriser or make him indignant' (ibid.: 64). In contrast to a 'scientific' subject, discussions on gender are rarely possible without a collapsing of the boundaries between private and public roles. Indeed, there is a great deal of indignation. People—men more than women—take it 'personally'. While women narrate their *experiences*, men narrate theirs. They could even be trained sociologists, but when it comes to gender they speak with the

attitude of daily life, the taken-for-granted relationships to everyday reality, from within the *epoche* (the bracketing or suspension of doubt) that is characteristic of the natural attitude. I quote from Garfinkel again:

The first assumption Schutz refers to is the 'epoche' of the natural attitude. He shows that in everyday situations the 'practical theorist' achieves an ordering of events while seeking to retain and sanction the *presupposition that the objects of the world are as they appear*. (ibid.: 62; emphasis mine)

Such an approach helps sort out some of the knots in my mind (evident no doubt in this paper as well). I have a hunch that there could be a connection between experience-based narration and the attitude *that the objects of the world are as they appear*. It also entails the important fact that for the theoriser of experience the perceptions of events are not outside of a role. The gendered responses of students can thus be productively explored within the ethno-methodological tradition of sociology. This investigation, which I hope to develop further elsewhere, forms part of a broader project that seeks to delve into the existing resources of the discipline for approaching the field of gender. An important task before us is not just to explore the degree to which different disciplines have been engendered but also to re-examine disciplinary traditions for understanding gender.

Conclusion

To summarise, this paper has been concerned with outlining the responses I faced both in the course of classroom teaching and when delivering occasional lectures on gender. These responses may be classified as:

1. interest, curiosity and involvement; gender courses can rarely be 'boring';
2. a lack of focus and coherence in people's questions and statements; periodic lapses into commonsense discourse; and
3. overt hostility; covert irritation.

Proceeding from these responses I have attempted to provide some provisional explanations. Schematically put, I have been trying to argue that:

1. The interest, often excitement, stems from the fact that they are able to listen and speak on matters that were thought to be outside the purview of legitimate academics.
2. Precisely because of its as yet non-legitimate standing, however, it need not be taken seriously.
3. Students were thus entitled to ask questions or make comments on anything at all on 'women' and 'men', with no effort required to relate them to the preceding lecture.

4. No expertise was deemed necessary, also because gender relations are something everybody 'knows' about.
5. Everybody 'knows' about them for two reasons. First, because the everyday theoriser, unlike the scientific theoriser, '*sanctions* his competence as a bona-fide member of the group as a condition for adequately appreciating the sense of his everyday affairs; he does not treat this competence as irrelevant' (Garfinkel 1974: 63). In other words 'he' and 'she' know about gender because they encounter it practically everyday. Second, everybody 'knows' about gender because in everyday situations the 'practical theorist' achieves an ordering of events while seeking to retain and sanction the *presupposition that the objects of the world are as they appear* (Garfinkel 1974: 62; emphasis mine). It is therefore *natural and universal*. This natural attitude stands in contrast with much sociological theorisation and discussions on method that precisely go to show how you cannot read off directly from the experiential.
6. There was often little coherence or focus in what was spoken. A particular statement could be contradicted by the next statement made by the same person. This contradiction is a feature of common sense.
7. One incident is as good as any other. Pure empiricism is often at work. One story of a battered wife can therefore logically be cancelled out by the case of an aggrieved husband.
8. If this is so, beginning with the personal is problematic, quite apart from whether one caters theoretically to a feminism that privileges experience.

While the above responses are typical and continue to reflect the perspectives of dominant sections not acquainted with or faintly acquainted with feminism, I must not neglect to mention the opposite problem: amongst the more informed, the existence of feminist theory can become an explanation in itself. Merely invoking the concept of patriarchy can be perceived as an adequate explanation of gender inequality.

Thus, the central lesson that I have learnt in teaching the sociology of gender has stemmed from my attempt to make the connection between the personal and the social. This attempt was successful insofar as it did produce a lot of interest, did help make the sociology of gender come alive and appear relevant. The attempt was problematic to the extent that I faced considerable resistance in shifting the ground of discussion from the realm of experience to the realm of theoretical analysis. It may also be worth mentioning in this context that I did not experience the same problems teaching other courses like 'Social Change in India' or even theory papers.⁶ However, when it came to disputatious issues like communalism, the Mandal Commission and caste issues, a similar obduracy was evident. *The greatest inflexibility to suspend the supposition that the world is as it appears*

to a member of society arises over the most contentious issues such as gender, caste and community. But this does not mean that I am arguing that the effort to connect the personal to the public, the experiential to the theoretical is itself at fault. Starting from theory does not in itself resolve the problem, for both teachers and students would vouch for the widespread inability to make theory appear relevant. My effort in this paper has only been to emphasise the importance of understanding the reasons for the difficulties involved, since the relationships between experience, the personal and the theoretical/political may well be more critical today than ever before in thinking about the future of women's studies and feminist politics in contemporary India.

Notes

1. I have been teaching the M.A. course on 'Women and Society in India: A Comparative Perspective', and my comments in the paper stem from my experience teaching this course. Patricia Uberoi had also introduced the M.Phil. optional 'Themes in Gender', which I have not taught.
2. I am not discussing the story of state support and institutionalisation of women's studies departments, for my concern here is confined to the micro level of the centre where I teach—my classroom and my other occasional forays in speaking on gender in different fora.
3. I have been keeping notes of classroom interactions throughout the period. Students were also asked at the beginning of the course to write down what they expected from a course on women and society. Responses always spilled over into more general observations on feminism.
4. As mentioned before, this paper acknowledges the positive achievements of teaching the course, but seeks to deal with what appeared as recurrent and difficult problems. The intention here is to move forward and not by any means to downplay the significant gains of women's studies within the centre.
5. A student from one of the batches did do a very fine dissertation on lesbianism in India for her M.Phil. with me.
6. This course has been dropped now and is taught as a substantive course on 'Structure and Process in India'.

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