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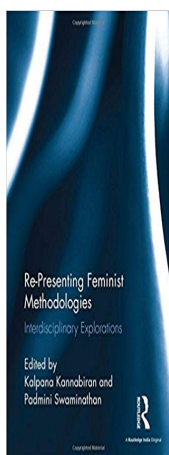
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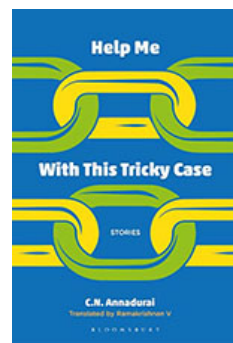


Exploring Interdisciplinarity Via Feminist Methodologies

Sona Mitra

**RE-PRESENTING FEMINIST METHODOLOGIES:
INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPLORATIONS** by Kalpana
Kannabiran and Padmini Swaminathan *Routledge India,*
2018, 374 pp., 8189

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The literature on feminist methods, methodologies and epistemologies which developed rapidly since the 1970s as an aftermath of the feminist movement across the world is undoubtedly rich, varied and wide ranging and evolved both in terms of its theoretical premises, as well as evidence based on real life experiences, anecdotes and other feminist writings. However, the history of Indian feminist writings date prior to the western waves of feminism and go back to pre-Independence era.

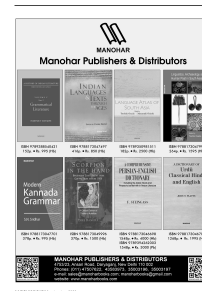
The richness of Indian feminist writings can be traced back to women writing in their bold and critical voices since 600 bc (Tharu and Lalita eds.; 1991). The critical voices related to the evolution of feminism, its methods, methodologies and epistemologies and its alliances with the global feminist politics however, evolved in the early twentieth century in India.

The works and writings of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Sarojini Naidu, Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, Durgabai Deshmukh, Kamini Roy, to name a few, were embedded deeply within the socio-economic, cultural and political history of India and were a result of the social reform movements as well as the contemporary anti-colonial struggles.

In the post-Independence era, feminist writings in India were strongly influenced by the women's movements in the backdrop, raising fundamental questions related to the status of women in both public and private spheres. These were critical feminist voices being raised to question the interrelations of power, hierarchy and identities based not only on caste, class, tribe, community, social locations but also those existing within families, workspaces and also raised complex questions on sexuality, discrimination and violence.

Despite such deep-rooted intersec-tionalities explored in the history of feminist writings in India, the notion of 'gender' still remains captivated in binaries. There remains a long way to go in terms of dislodging gender from such binaries in the methods and methodologies followed in feminist writings in India. A few researchers have rightly pointed out that methods do not require essentializing frameworks as 'feminist' but rather suggest that methodologies use feminism to enquire into phenomena that throw up questions of hierarchies other than gender, which in turn remains intensely influenced by feminist politics. It is in this backdrop that the book *Re-Presenting Feminist Methodologies: Interdisciplinary Explorations* adds great value to the existing literature on methods and methodologies used in feminist writings in India.

The book explores a wide range of feminist subjects, widely different in scope but related in principles; those that delve into the issues of feminist engagements and their changing contexts, knowledge creation within feminist disciplines and boundaries, and thematic issues of development and health. Thus the collection of the variety of chapters provides a wonderful array of reading and engaging with feminist methodologies used in both pedagogy and research across several disciplines of social sciences—economics, sociology, gender



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studies, development studies, law, among others. It is an anthology of essays, creative knowledge of a different order, bound together by their explicit feminist nature of enquiry. It is this particular characteristic of the book, which also makes the collection a unique read.

The section on tracing feminist journeys begins by an autobiographical account of the renowned academic and anthropologist Joan Mencher, who narrates her extraordinary experiences of six decades as a feminist anthropologist documenting women's subordination under diverse cultural and casteist social orders prevalent in India at the time. Mencher's narratives provide much fodder for developing frameworks, research methods and feminist methodologies around the questions of women and their livelihoods and their intersections with caste, class, culture and society for current researchers. The section also includes the essay by Kannabiran which builds up the arguments around the interactions of caste and family based on the key feminist construct of the 1970s women's movements—'the personal is the political', thus delving in realms of the private spheres of feminist enquiries. It ends with Ghazala Jamil's essay on the aspect of segregation of Muslim women in Delhi that explores new methodologies based on her innovative 'real-life methods'—methods not predetermined or structured, but allows enough space to '*present "facts" as truth*'—a research method that is one of learning for both researcher and the subject and thus providing space for enquiries embedded in feminist politics.

One of the central methodological discernments of feminist science studies was refuting the binary worlds of nature and culture. Over the last three decades, feminist science studies developed a vibrant epistemological and methodological apparatus. The second section on creation of feminist knowledge that transcends boundaries and disciplines and provides important insights into the same and includes essays not only encompassing feminist science studies, but extends to the interfaces of cyberfeminism and into the subject of socio-legal challenges in dealing with rape trials and rape laws.

The last two thematic sections deal with the politics of development in general and women's health in particular from the feminist lens. The explorations into the essays under the first theme revolve around the status of women within the development paradigm, the nature of integration of women in the erstwhile planning exercises, tools identified for empowering women and realizing their agency as active agents of economic and social change.

While Kalpana's critical take on emerging models of women's entrepreneurship based on micro-finance and micro-enterprise based development paradigms rightly identifies the flaws of such interventions by exposing the incorrect assumptions that the interests of finance capital and women's requirements coincide, (as Kalpana takes a macro-view of the overall approach to such empowerment initiatives), Bhavani Arabandi's essay using a clearly different approach and method of investigation to view the relationship between globalization and women's empowerment in

emerging services, highlights the benefits accrued by those women workers, who have been successful in integrating within the global value chain of business services. The essay quite correctly argues the increased agency of women, their increased status within the household as a result of being financially empowered; however, it does not take into account the larger contexts of the sustainability of such financial empowerment which is integrally linked to the process of accumulation of surplus and thus may be short lived in times of economic crisis. Albeit, the framework and methodology employed to enquire into questions of changes in women's status as part of the global workforce in business and financial service sector in this case, do not include such long-term macro queries.

Swaminathan's essay tracing the history of women in policy planning identifies the document 'Women's role in Planned Economy (WRPE), 1939' and offers intriguing information about the level of women's engagement in that period. Her article underlines the radicalism among women in the pre-Independence era and exposes its dilution post globalization, especially when the integration of women's question begins afresh in the 11th Plan period (2007-2012), despite being witness to several exercises such as the Committee on the Status of Women in India Report placed in 1974. She clearly reveals the poverty of the erstwhile planning exercise which clearly could not move out of the framework of 'identifying quantifiables for the development of women' instead of 'deploying methods for practicing qualitative changes', which restricted the role of women as 'beneficiaries' rather than transforming them as 'agents' of economic development. The essay briefly mentions the abolition of the Planning Commission in 2014 and the uncertainties around the future Planning exercises, but does not deal with the implications deeply; an inclusion of a brief discussion to this effect would have added tremendous value to the essay, especially for the development practitioners engaging with gender and public policies.

The collection of essays on health explores issues related to the attitude of the public health system towards women, use of technology in the form of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART) in the sphere of private service provisioning and its implications on women's health and their bodies provide a comprehensive perspective on the feminist notions of composition of family, rights of women over their bodies and sexuality, and reproductive and maternal health rights of women. The essay on use of ART from a feminist lens makes crucial interjections on the rise of commercial surrogacy and rights of surrogates, which unfortunately has not received adequate attention from the government and the legal system, despite several attempts by women's rights groups.

The collection thus presents an extensive range of interdisciplinary topics of discussion using a wide range of methods applied to each research question, however bound fundamentally by basic feminist inquiries. The appeal of the book thus lies with a broad section of audience ranging from researchers in all disciplines, interested in the interface of their topics with feminist politics as well as researchers

engaged in core issues related to feminism; identity, modernity, femininity, masculinity, among others. The book makes a fascinating reading experience as it begins by tracing the historical journey of feminist writings in India and ends in contemporary issues related to the current development trajectory and its implication for the agency of women.

However, the book would have been even more fascinating had it included a couple of essays on the intersectionalities of feminism and the current conjuncture of capitalism, driven by the hegemony of the 'global finance capital', and marked by the financial crisis, which would have also opened up opportunities to explore further methods for feminist inquiries. In addition, the editing should have avoided a few typos, which should be corrected in future editions.

Sona Mitra is an external consultant with the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability and her research interests include working on women's labour and analysing public policies using a feminist lens.

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