

## **Concept Note**

### **Young Research Scholars' Workshop Researching Rural India: Contemporary Challenges to Contextualizing Women's Lives**

**18-19 September 2019  
New Delhi**

In the historic debates on Development in the 1970s, when women and gender first began to emerge as categories of analysis and as target groups in development policy, scholars such as Ester Boserup and Vina Mazumdar thought it necessary to draw attention to women's role in agriculture. It was argued that women's role in the development of society was both critical and needed recognition. Scholars noted that in peasant societies, conditions in agriculture and, natural resources -- often community- owned --played a critical role in ensuring livelihoods. These contributed --if only in part- to providing sustenance and resources needed to live a life with dignity. While arguing for greater visibility to women, scholars also drew attention to the diversity of experiences and issues of unequal access given existing social divisions and hierarchies. Thus, women's roles, contribution and issues were seen to be linked to their differential and diverse locations based on caste, class and other factors. At the same time rural communities with vast peasant populations in the South Asian region-- and women amongst them -- were seen to be repositories of local/ indigenous/scientific knowledge.

Historical writing on the period of British rule in India highlighted the contradictions faced by the rural populace with regard to the practice of agriculture and related occupations. A focus on exploitative policies aimed at extracting maximum revenue laid bare the large scale impoverishment, immiserization and the accompanying saga of famine and starvation deaths, even as a few from the dominant classes flourished. These evoked responses from the vast mass of Indian people and led to a wave of anti – imperialist struggles as also revolts / uprisings against the old feudal class, which had sided with the colonial power. While these culminated in a sustained political movement for freedom from colonial rule, these ideas also found expression in the cultural domain in myriad forms — art, literature, drama, songs, music and folklore of the period. The struggles and involvement of rural poor-- peasants and landless labourers --in these especially in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, contributed to some attention being focused on their issues in political debates in independent India.

The understanding that the peasantry and rural masses had a significant role to play in political processes in independent India contributed to social science scholars turning their attention towards rural India in the early decades after independence. This research made available a vast amount of information focusing on agriculture, the peasantry and different dimensions of life in rural India in an effort to understand the conflicts and contradictions in Indian society. This also set the tone for the study of critical aspects of inequalities and hierarchies, their linkages with the social structures on which the patterns of land ownership and upper caste domination were based. Rural/Agrarian studies from both historical and contemporary locations featured prominently in social science disciplines. The findings often came in the form of village studies across different states and regions. Meanwhile, the political domain saw the emergence of powerful political leaders who rode to success and prominence on the basis of their popularity amidst the peasantry. However, it was clear that in both media depiction, law and official policy, the 'kisan' was often seen and presented as a rural patriarch. Despite their visible presence and militancy seen in actual peasant struggles, women often did not find a place in these studies either at the conceptual or empirical level and discussions on social issues seemed to recede over time.

At the same time, when the urban gaze shifted to the rural, especially the tribal, the portrayal often was of an exotic space where the past was ever-present. Apart from the innate scenic beauty, the people residing here came to be represent the token ethnic, a mix of the innocent rustic embedded in an unchanging past, irrational, superstitious, holding on to age-old beliefs, resisting modernization and progress. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century this portrayal frequently acted as a stereotypical trope for depiction of backwardness in Indian society. The more formulaic Bollywood cinema –with a few exceptions--drew upon this image to project the binaries challenging of modernity and change.

In more recent decades there is a renewed interest in the rural. Some have chosen to revisit villages studied in earlier rounds. The expansion of the market economy and processes of differentiation pose new challenges to the study of social relations and emerging aspirations in the rural context. For those exploring social conflict from a caste –centric perspective, the emerging tensions in rural society pose fresh challenges even as the wider linkages of these with class and social relations, aspects of political economy do not always adequately figure in these explorations. Women and gender, nevertheless largely seem to be missing from these.

Meanwhile, Women's Studies which has contributed significantly to building scholarship on sexual violence, the patriarchal underpinnings of social relations

and other critical aspects of gender relations, has been more focused on writing women into and through the lens of culture, often also from more urban locations. The focus on rural society, production relations, agrarian distress and development debates seem to have receded. It is a matter of concern that within Women's Studies, the field of intellectual enquiry that Vina Mazumdar herself was so closely involved with--the rural is/remains a vastly neglected field today.

This is in contrast with the experiences in the women's movement wherein since the 1990s, mass organisations of women have clearly felt the need to respond to growing unrest due to the agrarian crisis. Continuing farmers' suicides repeatedly draw attention to patriarchal provisions in official policy as also in social attitudes. Women's presence in farmers' struggles in recent years is clearly visible. Clearly the conflicts of rural India continue to provide the constitutive context for social relations and movements.

Today we live in a globalized world. This impresses upon us the need to reflect on several questions: Has the rural ceased to exist? Is it merging with the local? Can the two be inter-changed? How do we differentiate between the urban and the rural, even as the local catches up on us and exists in our lives on a day- to- day basis? From the foods we eat to the worlds we inhabit, the boundary between the rural and the urban appears to be dissolving- geographically, culturally, spatially. Yet these are/ maybe selections and smatterings. Each region in India offers a vast field of study with its own dynamics. There are linkages of the rural economy with the wider structures: of markets; social relations; structures and institutions; policies, which may further perpetuate differences and divides. Our research needs to take stock of deeper, underlying tensions, fissures, conflicts and perhaps the convergences, from different locations. These may be forging specific links with pre-existing structures based on caste, class, gender and/or other inequalities, discriminations and exclusions. These also provide the backdrop to specific assertions on account of aspirations for a more equal citizenship.

In more recent years the media has from time to time, brought to us sharp visuals of rural India: the devastation, the germs of resistance and efforts at mobilization. These reports --of agrarian distress, farmers' suicides and social conflict-- draw attention to the need to specifically focus on the Rural, despite these apparent crossings of boundaries on a daily basis. There have been demands for a special session of Parliament to focus on farmers, agrarian distress and the agrarian crisis. Draft Policies and legislation focusing on Women Farmers and their entitlements have been long pending. While the visuals now also show some women, it is well-known that discussions/ policies focusing on rural India, including from more market-oriented perspectives, continue to be cast in patriarchal modes.

**From the Vina Mazumdar Memorial Fund we wish to facilitate new and on-going research with a focus on women in rural India. The research may feature contemporary and/ or historical perspectives. With this purpose, as a first step, we invite young scholars who are engaged in research based on empirical work/ field studies conducted in rural India, as also conceptual studies, to present their work in the form of research -based papers in a Workshop to be held in September 2019. These may cover a range of themes pertaining to women and gender in the context of the: rural society and economy, land reform and land rights for women; women's work; rural-urban linkages; caste, tribe and community; social institutions; law, customs and culture; natural resources; environment.**

For further information and follow-up visit the CWDS website: