

Report of ICPR Sponsored National Interdisciplinary Seminar

On

Women in Indian Knowledge Tradition: Philosophy, Spirituality, Nature and Culture

Organised by Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi

February 8-10, 2017

The Department of Philosophy of Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi organized a three-day National interdisciplinary seminar from February 8-10 with sponsorship support from ICPR, Delhi. The theme of the seminar was "Women in Indian Knowledge Tradition: Philosophy, Spirituality, Nature and Culture". The seminar hosted 25 eminent speakers representing various disciplines from national and international universities sharing a common space for interdisciplinary outlook on the prescribed theme. The presentations by budding philosophers-the undergraduate students, which were exceptionally high on intellect value, became the highlights of the event.

The first day of the seminar, set forth a soothing beginning with Saraswati invocation by *Sangeetika*, Indian Music Society of KNC, which was followed by Lightning of Lamp ceremony by all the distinguished guests in the inaugural session of the day. The event caught momentum with an Introduction of the topic by the Convener, Dr. Geetesh Nirban, which unfolded the general understanding of Women and feminine perspectives, their roles, growth and development in knowledge arena. She also, mentioned about the importance of the Vedas, Upanishads and various Religious sects as an instrument to acknowledge the contribution of women. The Welcome address by the honourable Principal, Dr. KalpanaBhakuni, filled with encouraging words and her anticipation for the success of the event made the audience more curious giving way to willful participations. Felicitation of guests took place in typical KNC flair with a potted plant to all by Dr. ManjuPandit, In charge of the Philosophy Department of KNC.

In his address to the audience Dr. Anil Rai, Chair person of governing body of KNC, appreciated the growth and progress of the department and exhibited his hopes from the three-day event. The Address by the Chief guest Dr. Kavita A Sharma, President of South Asian University, in her speech wherein she picked women mythological characters like Sita, Kaushaliya, Radha, Draupadi, Dushala, Kunti, Gandhari establishing them through modern thoughts. Referring from various insightful books and the snippets from Bheeloka Bharat, she deconstructed popular notions and kept the listeners glued to her chain of thoughts like, "to be modern is not to be bereft of values". Dr. S.R Bhatt, Chairman of ICPR, in his key note address talked about the status of women in ancient Indian culture, the classical tradition and the medieval period. He contrasted the present melancholic situation with the position attributed to womanhood in the Rig Veda, Upanishad and Manusmriti. He advanced a strong appeal for denouncing discrimination and appreciating differentiation in terms of nature, physiological structure, virtues and roles to abstain from conflict of any kind. The advisor for the seminar Dr. BalaganapathiDevarakonda, in his address, introspected on the theme of the seminar and encouraged the audience to develop a critical eye by looking at the presentations from every possible perspective. After the discourses by the guests, the Convener extended Vote of Thanks on behalf of the department and urged everyone to join in for High Tea.

Next Session of the day, **Session Two** was chaired by Dr. Ranjan Ghosh, Former Director of ICPR and had Dr. VibhaChaturvedi, Former Head and Professor at Philosophy Department of University of Delhi, and Dr. KanchanaMahadevan, Professor and Head at Philosophy Department of University of Mumbai, as the speakers.

Dr. Chaturvedi's presentation titled "Women, Agency and Freedom: Two Women Characters from Mahabharata" included stories of Madhavi and Draupadi which pictured the ugly aspects of patriarchy where women are seen as property, woman's dignity is taken lesser to man's ego, humiliated by loved ones- all in the name of Dharma. She testified how man's morality as an act of convenience poses an essential deterrent to women's power of agency and freedom even today. She rendered an assertion that protestation is an expression of agency thus, one must exercise it.

Another paper titled "A Feminist Hermeneutics of Tradition: Revisiting the Mahabharata" by speaker Dr. KanchanaMahadevan emphasized the significance of tradition and interpretation of Mahabharata from feminist point of view. She argued that philosophy of Gadamer and Habermas are important in the course of this discussion which teaches us regarding the interpretation of the texts. Her presentation laid stress on primacy of 'interpretation' of plurality of meaning than of 'questions' that intend to remove ambivalence.

After the presentations the Chair summarized the papers for an understanding of them for undergraduate students. The success of any session may be gauged by the questions and queries it created in the mind of audience. One of the scholars asked the speakers to share their views regarding controlling and protecting women which were nicely answered, saying; protection in one way brings in control. So it should be left on the person himself to decide the end result. The presenters attracted many interesting questions; fresh insights were also provided by the audience.

Session Three, the closing session of the day began after the lunch break with renewed vigor. With Dr. Shugan Jain, Chairman of International School for Jaina Studies, serving as the Chair, two prominent speakers of the session were Dr. ManishaSethi, Associate Professor at Centre for the Study of Comparative Religions and Civilizations, JamiaMilliaIslamia, and Dr. Kamala Jain, Associate Professor at Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi.

The session proceeded with a background of Jainism by the Chair. Followed by Dr. Sethi's presentation of a paper titled "Gendering Moksha: The Case of Jaina Women Renouncers" in which she initiated a dialogue to recognise Jaina women capable of attaining moksha. In her paper, she pointed out conflicts in thought process of Digambara and Shwetambara schools of the Jaina community in regard to recognition of female mendicants, the discrimination in practices against nuns and the ordeal of reconciliation of female mendicant's agency with the patriarchal operational ways of the Jain school.

Another paper titled "A Symbol of Redefined Spirituality: Acharya Shri ChandanaJi" by Dr. K. Jain provided an account for the remarkable work of compassion by a contemporary Shwetambarsthaanakwasi nun, Acharya Shri ChandanaJi. This paper with no attempt to glorify a person's character was set rightly to the theme of the seminar by depicting the illustrative work a female mendicant has done in varied fields especially, education like Virhayatan for dedicated nuns and Pharmaceutical and engineering colleges for students. It recorded how the aim of seva, shiksha, sadhna found a place in her work which even defies all obstacles and traditional norms.

These presentations were followed by Q&A session and final remarks by the chair. The house dispersed after the Vote of Thanks and final updates from the Convener about the next day's events.

DAY TWO-9TH February 2017

Women in Indian Knowledge Tradition: Philosophy, Spirituality, Nature and Culture

The **second day** of the seminar was graced by the presence of Dr. Bina Gupta. **Session Four** of a new day began with the Plenary Address of Dr. Bina Gupta, Curators' Distinguished Professor Emerita of Department of Philosophy, University of Missouri; Affiliated faculty, South Asian Studies, University of Pennsylvania. Her Plenary Address became one of the highlights of the event in terms of excitement showed by the audience. In her presentation titled "Gargi and Maitreyi in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (BU): Women and Philosophical Acumen in Ancient Indian", she started drawing parallels with her own struggle as a woman scholar in the male dominated field of Philosophy. Furthermore, she moved on to investigate and reflect on the status of women in Ancient India.

In the first part of her presentation she examined roles assigned to women in Vedas and cited them as equal and independent participants in social, religious and intellectual spheres, by the means of their representation in Rig Veda and Yajur Veda. She reinitiated the same investigation in order to assess the status of women in Upanishad wherein she selected the dialogues between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi, and Yajnavalkya and Gargi. She happened to determine the status of women with the correlation between status, participatory rights and duties of women in functioning of any society. In Maitreyi's urge to know the truth of immortality, and Gargi's endeavor to check Yajnavalkya's knowledge of Brahman, both the women are established as eloquent and first grade philosophers in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. The whole presentation was a depiction and reflection of women not being inferior to men of the society in classical as well as in contemporary times. Later, the house was opened for discussion and interaction which was followed by High Tea for all the guests.

After a refreshing break, house settled in for **Session Five** which comprised of the Chair Dr. Bina Gupta and the speaker Dr. MeeraBaindur, Associate Professor at Centre for Philosophy and Humanities, Manipal University.

The presentation by Dr. Baindur on "Philosophy of Gender, Body, and Reproduction in Some Pre-Modern Textual Traditions of India" started with a background on Women, body and eco-feminism in which she delivered evidences on logic of dominance through value binary, value hierarchy and value dominance prevalent in patriarchal system. Through narratives from Puranas, she highlighted how the tradition continues to ingrain value differentiation in the minds of generation. In her paper, she intended to weaken the very foundation of the patriarchal house by highlighting the flawed concept of reproduction in Manusmriti, a text that abashedly governs the personal law till date. Her presentation exhibited an urgency for rationality over tradition with an appeal to counter the resistance-bearing instances found in age-old work of Manu that bring to light conceptualization of desire and sexuality emerging from the material understanding of the reproductive process giving rise to the social cultural practices of marriage and conjugality in a very Manu-centric sense. The deliberations were thus followed by Lunch for which all the guests and participants moved to the Student Activity Centre.

Following the alternate session of food for thought and body, the house was energized to indulge in reflection on the contribution of women in the field of Poetry and Fiction. **Session Six** was chaired by Mr. Come Carpentier De Gourdon, Convener of the Editorial Board, World Affairs Journal, and comprised of two presenter's viz. Dr. Rita Malhotra, Former Principal (Officiating) of Kamala Nehru College, and Dr. Alan Johnson, Professor at Department of Philosophy, Idaho State University.

Dr. Malhotra's paper, "Traversing social wilds through art form of poetry", witnessed the necessity of giving an exploratory space to women writing; a self-sustaining category of poetry imbued with knowledge of one's culture and experiences. Translating several evidences of the diverse history of women poets into poems of rebellion and self-expression, Dr. Malhotra's articulation of her own thoughts reverberated with the many women present, and brought to light her intention of proposing a bracket solely for female expression. Among the rhythmic verses of Mirabai, Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam, the audience found their thread of hope to hold onto in times of hopelessness.

Dr. Alan Johnson in his paper, "Shadows of Enhancement in Indian Forest Fiction: Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's 'The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey' personified women as nature and put forth his views in that context. He said the way nature has its own voice; women too have their own words and voice and are no less than any other sect. Quoting William Wordsworth and others he described women and their roles in the contemporary world, they being an essential part of the society. Both the speakers presented their diverse views aiming to the same goal of women being an important part of the society like men.

The **closing session** of the second day started after a refreshing tea break. Enthusiastic budding scholars presented their views; the excellent presentations graced the seminar. **Theseventh session** was thus chaired by Dr. Kanchana Mahadevan, Professor and Head, Department of Philosophy, University of Mumbai for the three presentations by Ms. Shruti Appalla and Ms. Meghna Jalan, KNC, Ms. Charu Pragya and Ms. Shubhangani Jain and Ms. Siddhi Shailendra.

Ms. Shruti Appalla and Ms. Meghna Jalan in their paper, "Intersection of Spirituality and Compassion: Insights through the work of Maa Amritanandmayi" highlighted that love and compassion are necessities and not luxuries for a healthy life. The central focus of their paper was to understand the teachings of Maa Amritanandmayi on the issues of compassion within the society. They also pointed at the need of love, care, understanding and equality between the sexes for a utopian world. None of the religions promote ill-treatment towards any of the sexes. Insights of Maa are an example of women nurturing the surroundings and garbing the world with their spiritual and benevolent thoughts.

Ms. Charu Pragya in her paper, "The Trials of Femininity: A contextual Reading of Women In Buddhist Thought Tradition of Ancient India" described Quasi-Feminism in light of ancient Buddhist texts, referring to Therigatha and other texts which solely attributed to female authorship. Her paper also focused on gender related issues, female spirituality and experiences in that regard. The feminine aspects and the vibrant views gave a distinct flavor to her presentation.

Ms. Shubhangani Jain and Ms. Siddhi Shailendra in their paper titled "Valmiki's Sita: A Contemporary Feminist Approach" glorified Sita as an epitome of sacrifice. She stood up for the females of the society and sank in mother earth for the good of the females of the society. Shedding some light on the revolutionary step of Sita, they related their paper to the contemporary times Patriarchal and

Societal pressures which force women to subsume under those pressures and not to raise their voice. The presentation tried doing justice with the topic of the seminar where the traditional account was viewed through a contemporary approach and develop a relation between Sita and present day women.

The presentations were admired by the scholars. The session became more interactive when the thoughts between the scholars and presenters got exchanged through various remarks, suggestions, and observations. Appreciating the presentations, the Chair of the session guided the scholars making up for the loopholes.

DAY THREE-10TH Febraury2017

Women in Indian Knowledge Tradition: Philosophy, Spirituality, Nature and Culture

After the deliberations of two days of the seminar, wherein a wide range of themes were discussed, the last and the final day of the seminar raised the set bar to another level with its interdisciplinary themed topics of presentations by the distinguished speakers lined up for the final day.

The **eighth session** was chaired by Dr. H.S.Prasad, Head, Department of Philosophy; University of Delhi. Papers were presented by Dr. Daniel Raveh, Professor, Department of Philosophy, Tel Aviv University and Dr. Bharti Puri, Associate Professor, IIT Delhi.

Dr. Daniel Raveh presented a paper on "Silence or Silencing? From GargiVacaknavi to Mahasweta Devi". In his presentation he reflected on the classical text "Brihadarnyaka Upanishad" which provides us with deep layers of human experience and the interwoven nature of the humans with the past, present, future and time respectively. He tried to cull out the nature of Gargi and portrayed her manly character. The central questions of his presentation were hidden in the topic of his presentation only, pointing; why Yajnavalkya asked Gargi to remain silent and Gargi's silence when Yajnavalkya asked her not to be so inquisitive. To the questions posed, he replied that Gargi was no less than men around her, contrary to what present day scholars like Radhakrishna calls her 'talkative' in his reflections on the past, she was fiery scholar. Artistically defining Gargi and her manhood he strengthened the worn out threads of the man and woman relationship with regard to his presentation.

Dr. Bharti Puri presented a paper on "Women in Buddhism". In her paper she tried putting forth an unseen picture of the Buddhist Religion. She shed some light on the patriarchy of the religion and its unsure stand on women questioning whether Buddha was willing to support the devaluation of women. She enunciated 'ways of women' is the third part of the three things that work secretly in Buddhism. Various illustrations in her presentation pointed at the misogynist nature for women. Putting forth varied instances of Buddhist practices where women were devalored, she made Buddhism stand in the witness box.

Both the presentations enlightened the audience by extending an interdisciplinary outlook and critical analysis of the scriptures. Perspective of the speakers forced the scholars and audience to reflect on the traditional framework.

To rest the working minds; the Chair of the session gave concluding remarks and emphasized on the significance of the themes of both the sessions. He expressed his views regarding the set pattern of interpretations of the scriptures and their relevance. The interaction was then followed by Lunch.

Session Nine was bestowed with presence of Dr. Minoti Chatterjee, Former Principal of Kamala Nehru College, as the Chair and two dignified speakers namely Dr. Amita Singh, Professor and Chair at Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University; and Dr. Rizwan Quiser, Professor and Head at Department of History, Jamia Millia Islamia. Dr. Chatterjee initiated the session by laying down the framework for the respective presentations increasing their instrumental value to answer doubts about the true nature of Sufism and how it serve as a tool for women empowerment and its stand against established religious practices.

Dr. Singh's paper titled "Search for the Woman Sufi Saint 'Baba Jaan'" provided an experiential account of the search that led to revelation of the story of Sufi Saint Baba Jaan. The narrative from a woman Sufi saint's life held the sanctity of the theme of the seminar intact. Forming link with the story of Baba Jaan, the presentation dealt with intricacies of Sufi culture and the firm line that disunites Sufism from Islam. Fanaa, Vaka and Ala-ul-haq elements that form the core of Sufism were discussed to showcase how it intends to dispel the darkness and propose a path to merge with Almighty, by suggesting that one must look within oneself for the knowledge of truth.

Another presentation by Dr. Quiser titled "(Re)Searching Women's Space in Sufism and Sufic Practices" discussed in detail the inclusive space offered by Sufism which made possible the active participation of women Sufi saints in medieval and contemporary times. Referring to important Women Sufi characters Aba Khatun, Raabia Basir, Noona Fatima, he acquainted the audience with originality, acceptability and mysticism ingrained in Sufism. In an attempt to bring to light the relevance of Sufism, he suggested the adoption and inclusion of Sufic Practices as means to create democracy of Gender spaces.

After the speakers finished their presentations, the Chair put forward her view in order to sensitize the young audience towards deeper aspect of Sufism, in contrary to its general perception as 'fashion' in modern times. With reference to reach and popularity of the Bauls in Bengal, she exhibited her hope that Sufism too would question the social, political order and reinstate itself in present times.

Valedictory, the closing session of the day, started after lunch. The session was chaired by Dr. Kanchana Mahadevan, Professor and Head, Department of Philosophy, University of Mumbai. Guest, Dr. Shashi Prabha Kumar, Founder Vice Chancellor, Sanchi University for Buddhist-Indic Studies, Madhya Pradesh. Professor and Former Chair, Special Centre for Sanskrit Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University was happy to inform that near about 25 speakers graced the three-day seminar with their views and presentations which were enjoyed by the scholars present from across the country.

She expressed hope that the teacher educators would continue deliberating the issues in future at appropriate forum for a meaningful teacher education and academically relevant contexts. Her presence and thoughts weaved the seminar completely with its 'title'. In light of the Vedic thought she interlinked Philosophy, Spirituality, Nature and Culture; four sub-titles of the Topic: Women in Indian Knowledge Tradition. Culling out the femininity of the four subtopics she glorified the essential necessity of women in this world. Man and Woman are the two halves of the same entity.

Relating 'Philosophy' to Deity Saraswati, Spirituality to Savitri, Nature to Draupadi, Sita, Mother Earth etc and Culture to Indrani she depicted the essence of women and their inseparable nature from any and every aspect of the universe. Resting her thoughts she added, women in Indian Knowledge Tradition have participated equally from the Vedic Times. Man and women are thus inseparable and equals in their own ways. None is superior to another but are the two sides of the same coin. Identity of one is at stake without the presence of the other.

The speakers and chairs for the seminar were embraced with love and a token of thanks for their willful participation and illuminating thoughts which raised the bar to the next level.

The progressive sessions and the instinctive thoughts of the scholars credited the seminar.

The Convener of the seminar, Dr. Geetesh Nirban, missing none and adding all, extended her vote of thanks to the speakers, chairs, teachers, research scholars and participants present in the hall. She especially highlighted the contribution of the students in making the seminar a huge success. She thanked her fellow colleagues and the advisors for the seminar and extended her thanks to ICPR without whose cooperation and faith, it would not have been possible to hold event of such grand stature. With a call for high tea, the closure of the event was announced.

(Eminent Scholars, Dr. KanchanaNatrajan and Dr. Sampadananda Mishra were not able to make it to the seminar due to health issues because of which two of the sessions had to be rescheduled.)

Rapporteurs for the seminar were

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(Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi)

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