

## Question Papers as the Site of Gendered Education Practice: A Study of Courses on Gender from Kerala

Linda Therese Luiz & Amrutha Rinu Abraham

### Abstract

Kerala is renowned for its high performance in terms of development and gender indices. Yet, an examination of courses on gender in Kerala reveals many contradictions. The paper will begin with an exploration of misconceptions in Kerala related to women's empowerment and feminism. The paper will examine the foundational aims of courses on gender and how they may clash with existing patriarchal structures especially during syllabus formation and classroom transactions. The paper will do so in a reflexive, inter-subjective manner. Next, the paper will focus on the role of question papers in the present exam-centric system of higher education. The paper will critically analyze questions papers from ten postgraduate-level courses on/related to gender from different institutions in Kerala in light of the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy. The paper will call for mainstreaming courses on gender and will provide some practical suggestions regarding question papers and pedagogic practices that can raise the standards of the discipline and revitalize gender studies courses in Kerala.

### Author Profiles

**Linda Therese Luiz** teaches Sociology at St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam. She is pursuing her doctorate on 'The Sociology of Sociology in Kerala'. Email: lindatherese@teresas.ac.in

**Amrutha Rinu Abraham** has been teaching Sociology for the past twelve years at CMS College (Autonomous), Kottayam. She completed her Ph.D from M.G University, Kottayam on 'Single Child Family and Adolescent Behavior Pattern'. Email: amrutharinuabrahamcms@gmail.com

## Question Papers as the Site of Gendered Education Practice: A Study of Courses on Gender from Kerala<sup>1</sup>

Linda Therese Luiz & Amrutha Rinu Abraham

A few years ago, Sheila Dikshit, the then Governor of Kerala commented on the ‘matriarchal’ society of Kerala, using the term to refer to the history of matriliney in some dominant-caste communities<sup>2</sup>. This inadvertent error reveals the general perception held outside Kerala that Malayali women are more empowered than women in other states. While women in Kerala do perform well (perhaps even better than women outside Kerala) on educational and health indices, their performance in economic and political spheres is poor as compared to the performance of men. The common discourse on empowerment in Kerala does not take note of the cultural and structural dimensions of inequality, and it allows the conception of the fully-empowered Malayali woman to flourish<sup>3</sup>.

In Kerala, the image of the empowered Malayali woman strangely coexists with a strong aversion to feminism and feminists. Popular culture often portrays feminists as ‘society ladies’ who do not work to earn a living but instead make life very difficult for the men around them by raising arguments for equality and women’s rights. Another version of feminism seen in popular culture is that of the assertive, single young women who challenge social and sexual mores. These images recur in popular media ranging from films to videos and messages on social media. The term ‘feminist’ itself is used as a pejorative. Many women shy away from the term<sup>4</sup>. The contempt towards feminists is manifest in the derogatory reference *‘feminichchi’*<sup>4</sup> – a term that has recently gained currency in Kerala. This paper focuses on Gender Studies courses in Kerala against this socio-cultural backdrop.

The higher education scenario in Kerala demands attention. Commentators note that in Kerala, social science disciplines are valued less than more ‘bankable’ disciplines like Medical Sciences and Engineering. There is an impression that only students who do not perform well according to the metrics of formal education take up the social sciences (Hakim 2012 and Mohammad 2012).

In recent years, the granting of academic autonomy to a number of colleges in Kerala has provided an opportunity to transform the social sciences and to make them challenging, engaging, and relevant. However, serious concerns are emerging about the appointment of

---

<sup>1</sup> The first author acknowledges the contribution of the organizers, facilitators and co-participants of the Second Induction Programme organized by the MHRD-TLC, Department of Education, University of Calicut which provided many inputs for this paper. We thank Ancy Thomas, Hakim K.S., Lizmitha Godwin, Niyati Pavithran, Savya V. Neelankavil, Surabhi Ghai and R.K. Varghese for all the help rendered. The insightful comments of Biju Vincent, Pushpendra Johar, Sheeba K.M. and Thampatty Madhusood have helped us improve this article. We also place on record our debt to the anonymous peer reviewers whose comments have enabled us to sharpen the focus of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> Kerala society has in the past had dominant castes which were matrilineal in character, but never matriarchal. Under the impact of modern legislations, even the matrilineal character has been greatly eroded.

<sup>3</sup> There is a similar fallacious tendency to think about ‘women in the West’ as being fully empowered.

<sup>4</sup> A colloquial feminine version of the term ‘feminist’ in Malayalam to refer to women who speak up for their rights. The suffix ‘-ichchi’ has a belittling effect in the context. The term was coined in online debates surrounding the alleged sexual assault of a prominent film actress commissioned by another actor, and the formation of a group called ‘Women in Cinema Collective’ (WCC) who have since been quite vocal about the rights of women in media.

Boards of Studies, the methods of preparation of syllabi, and the setting of question papers in autonomous institutions. Teachers may raise the standards of the teaching-learning process in order to encourage student reflection. However, they may also choose to continue with 'traditional' patterns in which students might find it easier to score marks. The latter case may be a consequence of management-mandated cross-departmental comparison and evaluation on the basis of examination results. This may tempt faculty to dilute academic expectations (although paradoxically this would undermine the very assumptions on which academic autonomy was granted).

We locate our study of Gender Studies courses against this background of perceptions about women's empowerment, anti-feminist sentiment, and the higher education landscape in Kerala. This paper is an attempt to "defamiliarize the familiar," (Bauman 1990) and reflect on our own practices as teachers involved in preparing, teaching and evaluating some of these Gender Studies courses within an interdisciplinary framework.

### **From Women's Studies to Gender Studies**

Women's Studies as a discipline has its background in feminist politics. The women's movement in India highlighted the invisibility of women's experiences and knowledge in various spheres including academia (Poonacha 2003). The entry of Women's Studies courses into the Indian university system after the *Towards Equality* Report of 1975 was a major achievement of the women's movement in India. From the late 1980s, the University Grants Commission (UGC) supported Women's Studies Centres that were envisaged as playing an interventionist role by initiating the gender perspective in many domains in the generation of knowledge, the field of policy and practice. They were designed to act as catalysts for promoting and strengthening Women's Studies through teaching, research and field action projects. (UGC 2012).

The academic mandate of these Women's Studies Centres was also clear: "The biased gender perspective within (other) disciplines determines their very structures and need to be systematically critiqued by scholars in Women's Studies" (UGC 2012).

From the 1980s onwards, debates raged about the nature of academic intervention that was expected of Women's Studies. Many favored the integration of feminist theory, methods, perspectives, and sensibilities *within* other disciplines rather than an autonomous discipline arguing that autonomy might lead to ghettoization (Rayaprol 2011).

By the 1990s, Women's Studies had gained acceptability and become well established within the university system in India (UGC 2012). By this time, the discipline had shifted focus from 'women' to 'gender' and incorporated a broader outlook. Some feminists were concerned that the shift would be to the detriment of the discipline: "the seemingly objective approach suggested in the term gender studies (may) make invisible the privileges that masculinity confers on men over women" (Poonacha 2003) Today the term 'Gender Studies' is widely in use.<sup>5</sup> In Kerala, Women's Studies/Gender Studies courses were incorporated into various

---

<sup>5</sup> A colloquial feminine version of the term 'feminist' in Malayalam to refer to women who speak up for their rights. The suffix '-ichchi' has a belittling effect in the context. The term was coined in online debates surrounding the alleged sexual assault of a prominent film actress commissioned by another actor, and the formation of a group called 'Women in Cinema Collective' (WCC) who have since been quite vocal about the rights of women in media.

disciplines since the 1990s, although it was only in 2005 that they were formally introduced at the university-department level (Subrahmanian 2019).

### **The Politics of Syllabus Formation**

Courses on gender often generate impassioned debate and discussion. Their formulation is also therefore a site for the playing out of gendered power relations. Patriarchal attitudes regarding gender and gender roles inform the heated debates surrounding courses on gender and their syllabi. Even within academia there are those who uncritically accept the common-sense perception that women in Kerala are already empowered, and therefore gender need not be given too much importance.<sup>6</sup> Members of Boards of Studies (both men and women) whom the authors are familiar with have questioned the need to include gender perspectives in other courses, when a Gender Studies course was already in existence.

A Board of Studies meeting in 2018 at an institution in Kerala witnessed heated discussion when some male board members suggested the inclusion of the topic ‘Crimes by Women against Men’ alongside existing content on ‘Violence against Women’ in the Gender Studies course. They argued that the topic needed to be included for a balanced perspective, to make the course non-discriminatory, and truly reflective of existing social realities.

Ignoring gendered structural inequalities and instead focusing on men as victims is a familiar tactic. It is reminiscent of a common complaint at American universities that programs and resources exclusively for women are discriminatory in nature.<sup>7</sup> Under the cover of maintaining ‘objectivity’, such strategies serve to diminish the already sparse academic space that has been allocated to understanding unequal gender relations. If “the changing nomenclature of Women’s Studies to Gender Studies speaks volumes of men’s fear of exclusion,” (Poonacha 2003) then foregrounding male-centric concerns in Gender Studies courses can also be understood as part of the subtle reinforcement of structured inequalities.

### **Teaching-Learning Practices**

Classrooms in India are generally understood as spaces where the modern workforce and ‘obedient’ future citizens are moulded. They seldom encourage differences of opinion or questioning from students. Many students are passive and lacking in motivation and enthusiasm in the classroom. Against this backdrop the Gender Studies classroom can present a contrast by serving as a site to challenge the deeply entrenched ideas of patriarchy. In co-educational classrooms especially, these challenges mounted against the patriarchy often provoke impassioned responses from students, who find themselves reflecting upon their lived experiences. The Gender Studies classroom may also be discomfiting to students as it questions their core assumptions. But is this what is in fact transacted in Gender Studies classrooms at the higher education level?

---

<sup>6</sup> This is not the case of Kerala alone. One of the authors has heard her teacher lament about the same issue in discussions about Women’s Studies at the University of Delhi over a decade ago.

<sup>7</sup> The complaint has been taken up by the US Education Department for consideration. “Ed Department Investigates Federal Complaints Women’s Programs, Resources at Universities Discriminate Against Men.” MSN News. Accessed on 20 November 2018. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/local/ed-department-investigates-federal-complaints-women-e2-80-99s-programs-resources-at-universities-discriminate-against-men/ar-BBPPQ4R>.

Aparna Rayaprol writes that Gender Studies programs and courses are encountered by “students of today who do not have enough first-hand knowledge of the struggles of women and have reaped the benefits of the movement. This results in an apathy and indifference towards issues” (Rayaprol 2011). Feminist scholar Sheeba K.M. in an address delivered at the 45th Annual National Conference of the Kerala Sociological Society in 2018 outlined various deficiencies of courses on and related to gender in Kerala. She notes the uneasy blending of gender perspectives into disciplines only to seem politically correct or ‘updated’. According to her, to confine the understanding of gender power relations to a fixed syllabus is to co-opt and confine its radical potential. This is because there is no epistemological shift when teachers teach feminist theory and openly contradict it themselves. She also remarks that the syllabi, teaching and examinations do not seem designed to examine the *deep structures* of gendered relations. In effect, many Gender Studies courses in Kerala turn out to be ‘Status of Women’ courses which, conforming to the existing positivist academic structure, focus on some ‘facts’ regarding gender without adequate focus on feminist politics, theories or methodologies.

Even the best Gender Studies syllabi are ill-served by indifferent pedagogic practice. Both the authors have experience of faculty members teaching Gender Studies courses distancing themselves from feminist notions of any kind. During discussion on course contents, colleagues have made clear that they are not feminists, perhaps suggesting a fundamental disagreement with the content of the course.<sup>8</sup> We are led to wonder why this is so with a Gender Studies course, when liberal academics in Kerala would not similarly wash their hands off anti-class or anti-caste movements (Johar 2018).

Comments made about Women’s Studies teachers in India fifteen years ago are echoed in observations on those who teach Gender Studies.

*Are often unable to appreciate the political content of the discipline; or even if they do, they are not able to draw upon the rich experience of feminist activism to gain insights and creatively enrich their teaching/research programs. Women’s studies research and teaching programs increasingly become a study of women without reflecting the feminist underpinnings of the study... without a suitable knowledge and appreciation of the feminist struggles, the newly initiated centres/cells fail to transmit feminist ideas to new generations of women. (Poonacha 2003).*

This is rooted in the nature of social science pedagogy in Kerala in general, where syllabi and social realities remain separate from one another and rote learning is often encouraged.

### **The System of Examinations**

Well-formulated courses and radical teaching-learning practices are not complemented by engaging or radical evaluation practices, instead traditional evaluation practices prevail. Although teachers attempt to encourage students to introspect, engage with, and analyze the

---

<sup>8</sup> A similar aversion to feminism has been noted in neighboring Tamil Nadu. Anandhi S. and Padmini Swaminathan, “Making it Relevant: Mapping the Meaning of Women’s Studies in Tamil Nadu,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41, no. 42 (Oct. 21-27, 2006)

themes in the syllabus, examination question papers require only basic and banal levels of engagement on the part of the student. These question papers adhere to standardized templates, contain predictable questions, and test rote memory more than critical thinking.

The seemingly harmless question paper actually determines the fate of disciplines in the university. This is because examination question papers are the most commonly used tool for assessing students. It could be said that “What gets graded is what gets valued” (Wilson 1994). This results in students studying with examination questions in mind. If the examination system rewards the reproduction of ‘facts’, then students focus on learning and reproducing facts. This keeps learners insulated from both critique and praxis.

### Researching Question Papers: The Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy

Since it was developed in the mid-20th century, Bloom’s Taxonomy of educational objectives has been a handy tool for educators to understand and evaluate the learning levels of students.<sup>9</sup> A modified two-dimensional Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (RBT) developed in the last decade of the 20th century<sup>10</sup> has proved to be efficient in helping evaluators assess their own assessment practices. One dimension focuses on different forms of knowledge (factual, conceptual, procedural, and metaknowledge) and the other dimension focuses on levels of cognition in an increasing order of complexity (remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate and create) (Krathwohl 2002).

This paper uses the RBT to understand the level at which question papers of Gender Studies courses in Kerala operate in some institutions. It does not claim to be representative of nor does it seek to make generalizations regarding courses on / related to / dealing with gender in all postgraduate programs in Kerala. However, it does try to develop insights into how student learning on gender is assessed across diverse disciplines. For the purpose of this study, ten gender-related question papers set for postgraduate semester exams between 2013 and 2018 were privately sourced from three universities and three autonomous colleges in Kerala.<sup>11</sup> Five of these question papers were from courses in Sociology programs: four named *Gender and Society* and one named *Streeprasnangalum lingapadavi padhanangalum* (Women’s Issues and Gender Studies). Four other question papers were from courses in Economics, Social Work, Home Science and History programs, namely Gender Economics, Women Development (sic), Women’s Studies and Women’s History of India.<sup>12</sup> The last question paper was *Women and Education* which was part of the Post Graduate program in Women’s Studies offered by one of the universities.

Each question in these ten question papers was given a value with two characters based on the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy. The first was either F, C, P or M standing for ‘Factual’,

<sup>9</sup> The taxonomy, named after its lead author Benjamin S. Bloom, pointed out six levels of thinking – knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The taxonomy of cognitive skills has received the most attention, though other taxonomies for the affective and psychomotor domains were also developed by the same team. The Bloom’s Taxonomy received a tremendous response across the globe and has spawned numerous studies and evaluations.

<sup>10</sup> The RBT tried to rectify some of the major faults of the Bloom’s Taxonomy. It was developed by another team which included one of the students of Bloom and also one of the co-authors of the earlier taxonomy.

<sup>11</sup> Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Thunchathuzhathachan Malayalam University, Tirur, University of Calicut, CMS College, Kottayam, Sacred Heart College, Thevara and St. Teresa’s College, Ernakulam.

<sup>12</sup> A perusal of gender question papers from literature departments in Kerala may give a different impression from what we have put across, as literature departments in Kerala have generally displayed more critical perspectives and engaged with social realities at greater levels of complexity.

‘Conceptual’, ‘Procedural’ and ‘Meta-cognitive’. The second character was a number from 1 to 6 depending on the cognitive level of the question, 1 standing for ‘remember’, 2 for ‘understand’, 3 for ‘apply’, 4 for ‘analyze’, 5 for ‘evaluate’ and 6 for ‘create’. So the question ‘*The National Commission for Women was set up in...*’ was marked as F1 (factual recall), ‘*Explain the terms gender and sex*’ as C2 (conceptual understanding), ‘*Examine the nature and forms of gender stereotyping and gender discrimination in the field of education*’ as C3 (concept application), ‘*Examine the need for new techniques to understand women’s history*’ as M4 (meta-cognitive analysis), ‘*Evaluate Health and Nutritional Policies in India*’ as F5 (factual evaluation) and ‘*How will you check atrocities against women?*’ as F6 (factual creation). Where the coders disagreed about cognitive level of the question, the calculation was based on the higher level.

### What the Question Papers Revealed

The initial analysis of the ten question papers revealed that 159 of the 237 questions (67%) tested the basic levels of memory and understanding. It was puzzling that the remaining 78 questions (nearly one-third) tested at higher levels, as our experience of going through thousands of postgraduate answer scripts over the course of our careers indicates otherwise. Then we realized that students often write descriptive responses even when asked ‘examine/assess/evaluate/analyze/critically examine’. Most examinees thus end up writing similar answers, often learnt by rote. Changes in the ‘key words’ indicating the expected cognitive levels seems to make little difference to them. For instance, the question ‘Analyze the status of women in Kerala based on various indicators’ purportedly tests analytical abilities, but due to the direct and predictable nature of the question, in effect a student may find an appropriate passage in a prescribed reading or be provided with an analysis during class that would enable her to memorize the answer for the exam. These memorized answers generally take the form of factual descriptions and are accompanied either by no analysis or ‘readymade’ analysis.

	Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate	Create	TOTAL
Factual	F1 – 22	F2 – 25	F3 – 0	F4 – 24	F5 – 6	F6 – 1	78
Conceptual	C1 – 53	C2 – 58	C3 – 2	C4 – 35	C5 – 4	C6 – 2	154
Procedural	P1 – 0	P2 – 0	P3 – 0	P4 – 0	P5 – 0	P6 – 0	0
Metacognitive	M1 – 0	M2 – 1	M3 – 0	M4 – 3	M5 – 1	M6 – 0	5
TOTAL	75	84	2	62	11	3	237

Table 1: Initial analysis of Ten PG-level Women’s Studies Question Papers Using Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy

On the basis of our experience in evaluating answer scripts, questions with keywords such as ‘Examine/assess/evaluate/analyze/critically examine’ were downgraded to the level of remember/understand. Questions such as ‘*Critically analyze the psychoanalytic theory of Gender*’ and ‘*Discuss the role and status of women in political sphere*’ were shifted in this manner. Following this filtering, it was found that 200 out of 237 questions (84%) focused on Remember and Understand, which reiterated our earlier impression that question papers conservatively steer away from the higher levels of cognition.

	Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate	Create	TOTAL
Factual	F1 – 22	F2 – 46	F3 – 0	F4 – 6	F5 – 3	F6 – 1	78
Conceptual	C1 – 53	C2 – 47	C3 – 2	C4 – 20	C5 – 3	C6 – 2	154
Procedural	P1 – 0	P2 – 0	P3 – 0	P4 – 0	P5 – 0	P6 – 0	0
Metacognitive	M1 – 0	M2 – 5	M3 – 0	M4 – 0	M5 – 0	M6 – 0	5
TOTAL	75	125	2	26	6	3	237

Table 2: Revised Analysis of Ten PG-level Women’s Studies Question Papers Using Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy

### Findings of the Study

Encouraging independent and critical thinking does not seem to be an intended outcome, judging by these question papers. It is a cause for concern that even at the postgraduate level the focus of evaluative practices is to test memory rather than understanding and application. If higher levels of cognition are absent in question papers related to gender, it strongly suggests that the teaching-learning process is also not geared to encourage thinking and reflection. The very nature of the questions reduces the discipline to a collection of facts and set opinions in the eyes of its learners. One out of the few questions of a higher order in the question papers was as follows: *‘Is feminism today going through the right path? Comment.’*

The framing of this question suggests a value judgment against feminism. Further, the answer to this question could be based on the examinee’s common-sense understanding. The student may answer the question with stereotypes/assumptions, just as the student may answer with insightful analysis. Domain knowledge is made redundant here. This shows that the prevalent evaluation methods do not permit the aims of the course to be realized.

In the question papers that we analyzed, we found no questions at all that could be categorized as testing the procedural cognitive level, although there were a handful of questions that tested the student’s ability to perform meta-cognitive analysis. The number of conceptual questions (154) was almost double the number of factual questions (78).

Related to this is structure of question papers. The question papers followed different evaluative schema. Six followed a system of weightages. Four were mark-based. Nine had three sections each, the last section accounting for questions with greater marks/weight as well as generally testing higher levels of cognition. One question paper had only two sections of which the first had four 20-mark questions of comparatively greater complexity than the fifteen 4-mark questions in the second section. In contrast to this pattern, a few question papers we had seen from Central Universities in India at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level seemed to have only essay questions.

Faculty teaching Gender Studies courses in Kerala need to seriously consider whether they should be fixated on conceptual and factual clarity at the postgraduate level to the extent that happens now.

“Understanding ceases with the precedence of remembrance over it” (Gurukkal 2018). For analytical abilities to be foregrounded as the outcome of gender related courses (as opposed to memorization), the structure of questions itself needs to change. Even the use of keywords specified in the RBT does not necessarily ensure that higher cognitive levels are tested, as our preceding analysis shows. A creative combination of concepts and real-life situations would be necessary to make students engage with the material and the questions using higher levels of cognition than just memory.

For instance, the following question from a undergraduate-level gender-related question paper from the University of Delhi: ‘*How does the relationship between gender and caste pose a challenge for feminist politics?*’ This question involves multiple variables and challenges the examinee to explore higher levels of analysis. It is not predictable in the way this question from our data set is: ‘*Write an essay on gender-specific issues.*’ Students may respond to the latter question with statements of facts and be deemed to have presented a worthwhile response. A commentary, if at all, is usually confined to the last few lines or paragraphs and these too may be found repeated in different answer scripts.

One understands from this repetition the extent to which students depend on ‘stock answers’. Questions to test analytical abilities may be undermined by recourse to readymade answers based on guidebooks and notes provided by teachers. In many higher education settings in Kerala, the pattern of question papers, the significant areas from which questions may be asked, and the possible weightages of questions can be easily identified. This means that students can cut corners in preparing for their examinations. Questioning on predictable lines begets predictable, memorized answers and reduces the level of thinking in students. What gets lost here is a concern for the discipline and its objectives. The scores in the examination result in terms of marks seem to become the ultimate objective and purpose of knowledge production and engagement. The UGC in its report of the Committee on Evaluation Reforms (2018) notes that this exam-oriented system of higher education takes the joy out of learning and does not even achieve the desired outcomes in the graduates (Salunkhe et al. 2019).

In discussions with faculty members who are involved in setting question papers we found that predictable questions are preferred so that the examinations are not too tough for students. (Tough papers might unduly affect the results of the concerned university or college). When teachers newly inducted into the system of examinations look for guidance on preparing question papers, they are directed to learn from previous question papers. Sometimes the very same, or similar, ‘stock questions’ are used almost annually. With the implementation of ‘question bank’ systems by universities and autonomous colleges, there is every reason to fear that the practice of preparing standardized answers is going to become even more common, even accepted. This will continue unless question banks are updated regularly and questions themselves are framed to test different cognitive levels.

Another factor to be considered is the sidelining of vernacular languages. Question papers are in English, with no translations available. There seems to be an understanding that postgraduate examinations are to be written in English, while undergraduate examinations may be taken in either English or Malayalam. However, even at the undergraduate level, questions appear only in English. This coupled with a lack of resources in Malayalam contributes to students’ distance

from social science disciplines. Liberal use of vernacular languages in classrooms as well as in question papers could facilitate more meaningful participation of students in the pedagogic process as well as better responses in their examinations.<sup>13</sup>

This study of the content and structure of question papers is at a preliminary stage. The significance of question papers for the pedagogic process however warrants a deeper study. Matrices of greater complexity are required to assess questions, as is taking into consideration factors such as the directness (or lack thereof) of the question, the number of variables that must be dealt with in answering the question, or whether a comparative understanding is required.

The RBT itself was not able to help in grading the complexity of the questions in finer detail. A question with a keyword ‘Assess’ or ‘Discuss’ was initially taken to be at the fourth cognitive level of Analyze. But this level contained questions of such varying complexity (questions asking for explanation/discussion; questions asking to compare and differentiate; questions linking different concepts; questions linking concepts to social realities, questions asking for cause and effect, etc.) that such a demarcation was not helpful beyond a point.

### Looking Forward

Outcome-Based Education (OBE) is the new catchphrase in the discourses on higher education (Gurukkal 2018). What are the intended outcomes of a course on gender? Are these intended to make students more conscious of gender relations in their society? To make gender relations equitable? In the absence of a study of syllabus objectives, we take the aforementioned objectives to be the desired outcomes of Gender Studies courses. From our encounters with hundreds of post graduate answer scripts, it seems that regardless of the aims and philosophy behind the course, the outcome is often that students learn some facts about gender and feminism, but are unable to apply this knowledge to think about their contexts critically or make a difference in their lives. Of course, given the context, even the outcomes mentioned in specific syllabi may not have feminist intentions. It is also worth wondering whether a syllabus is meant to ‘reflect’ society (in terms of providing a status report) or to offer alternatives and possibilities.

A comment in the context of the MeToo Movement draws attention: “Both sexual harassment and the kinds of responses from the accused lay bare a critical failure of our education system... That our educational system is failing to teach boys and men to recognize, challenge and refrain from sexist and even unlawful behavior must be acknowledged and tackled.” (Jha 2018). The need for gender-related/gender-sensitive understanding is also becoming more “visible” in most non-technical programs.

The top-down demand for Gender Studies courses begs a comparison with another course that has the special mandate of the UGC. Following a directive from the Supreme Court of India, the UGC decided that Environmental Studies may be introduced as a mandatory six-month course at all the universities and colleges of India. Though important and relevant, it is non-specialists who teach the course, set its question papers and evaluate it. Do these factors lead to the trivializing of the ideas taught? There would definitely be some

---

<sup>13</sup> Question papers we had sourced of one of the central universities had questions in both English and Hindi.

percolation of ideas to those who transact the course but perhaps we need to think of ways to vitalize its practice. Can we imagine more efficient ways of conveying the message of these important branches of study through our education system? It is time that interdisciplinary Women's Studies/Gender Studies departments are established and nurtured at colleges instead of being treated as fringe disciplines. Can we also consider the possibility of Gender Studies, like Environmental Studies, being made a mandatory course like Language for all undergraduate programs?

At present existing Women's Studies Centres at colleges seem to provide only occasional workshops and short-term courses in stereotypical female careers like jewelry designing, fashion designing, or baking. There are few Departments of Women's Studies that function at the college level across India, but none at all in Kerala. Therefore, it is non-specialists, those with degrees in Sociology or Political Science or Social Work or Home Science who teach the course. Some may argue that having studied a course is sufficient preparation for teaching it,<sup>14</sup> but an equally strong argument could be made for the need for specialists to transact Gender Studies courses.

As Gender Studies is conceived of as an interdisciplinary domain, whom do we consider to be specialists? How should they be selected and hired? Given the nature of social science pedagogy and teacher appointments combined with the mistrust of feminism in the collective consciousness in Kerala, this is a vexed issue.

One possible method would be to select experts who have substantial research and publications on gender. Considering that there are innumerable studies on women, women's issues, status of women, participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Self-Help Groups which are empirical in nature but have little to do with feminist theory, sensibilities or politics, this too can prove limiting. How can we ensure the presence of faculty with feminist sensibilities to teach the Gender/Women's Studies courses?

And how can the courses be transacted effectively, and their transformative potential realized? Teachers may gain conceptual clarity regarding gender but its translation into pedagogic practices requires specific attention. Gender-sensitization and awareness workshops for teachers could also focus on the significance of specific pedagogic practices. The entire pedagogic chain, from the creation of syllabi to classroom transactions and evaluation practices need to be re-imagined.

Bloom's Taxonomy and the RBT are familiar enough to students of education programs, but they are comparatively recent entrants into the field of higher education in India. Some higher education institutions have adopted it since the Assessment and Accreditation process started in the 1990s. However, it was only in 2018 that that the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) mandated the use of the RBT in the designing of question papers (AICTE 2018). The UGC in the same year noted with concern the tendency for exams to test only memory and suggested the setting of questions at all levels of cognition as part of recommendations

---

<sup>14</sup> Is this not what is happen with most papers in most courses in India? Teachers teach papers not because they have specialized in it but because that is what the syllabus and the departmental division of labor requires. One hears about choice-based courses for students, but when will college and university teaching in India become flexible enough to allow individual teachers to design the courses they are to teach?

for a comprehensive overhaul of the evaluation system (Salunkhe et al 2019). Yet it does not go so far as to make these recommendations binding. In Kerala, the RBT is only catching on at the higher education level with discourses on OBE prompting an integrated transformation of the pedagogic chain. The scope of assessment tools including question papers in raising the standards of the discipline has not been fully realized. Greater awareness and training should be provided to faculty members regarding question-paper setting. The mandatory use of the RBT in framing question papers can be the first step in revitalizing the higher education scenario in Kerala.

Reform in question papers needs to be complemented by reforms in classroom transactions as well. More democratic environments and techniques such as flipped classroom<sup>15</sup> and Think-Pair-Share<sup>16</sup> could encourage student reflection and critical thinking. Greater dynamism can be brought in through field-based engagement with contemporary local issues and movements, through discourses in regional languages, and more lively pedagogy and question papers. Questions could be related to current realities or be critical in nature such that rote learning would be discouraged. With all this in place perhaps we could look forward to a day when it is acknowledged in Kerala that feminism is not a bad word!

---

<sup>15</sup> Flipping is a mode of learning which at the most basic level involves an inversion of traditional classroom processes. Instead of receiving knowledge from the teacher inside the classroom, students are expected to access previously designated materials, usually with the help of technology, before the class. In class the teacher facilitates recall, discussions and analysis of the topic. The learning environment is thus made flexible and learner-centric.

<sup>16</sup> This is a method in which students are asked to reflect upon specific topics before or during class ('think'). In the classroom small groups of 2-3 students discuss and compare their understanding ('pair'). The outcome of this close discussion is then 'shared' with the whole class. This is a way to facilitate participatory learning among students.

## Select Bibliography

Anandhi S. and Padmini Swaminathan. 2006. "Making it relevant: Mapping the meaning of women's studies in Tamil Nadu," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41(42):4444-4454

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1990. *Thinking sociologically*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Gurukkal, Rajan. 2018. Towards Outcome-Based Education. *Higher Education for the Future* 5(1) :1-3. DOI: 10.1177/2347631117740456

Mohammed, N.P. Hafiz. 2012. Panam kaaykkaan nammal nadunna marangal (Children – The Trees We Plant to Produce Money). *Mathrubhumi* 90(16):80-84

Hakim, K.S. 2012. Malayali thazhayunna maanavikavishayangal (The Humanities Subjects Abandoned by the Malayali). *Mathrubhumi* 90(11):34-39

Jha, Anushna. 2018. A gender curriculum. *The Hindu* (Kochi, Kerala), 20 November: 9

Krathwohl, David R. 2002. A revision of Bloom's Taxonomy: An overview. *Theory into Practice: Revising Bloom's Taxonomy* 41(4): 212-218. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1477405>

Poonacha, Veena. 2003. Women's studies in Indian universities: Current concerns. *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(26):2653-2658.

Rayaprol, Aparna. 2011. Teaching gender in Indian universities: Reflections on feminist pedagogy. *Sociological Bulletin* 60(1):65-78.

Subrahmanian, Maya. 2019. Autonomous women's movement in Kerala: Historiography. *Journal of International Women's Studies* 20(2): 1-10

University Grants Commission. (n.d). Twelfth Plan Guidelines (2012-2017) on Development of Women's Studies in Indian Universities and Colleges & Capacity Building of Women Managers in Higher Education. New Delhi: University Grants Commission.

Wilson, Linda. 1994. What gets graded is what gets valued. *The Mathematics Teacher* 87(6): 412-414.