

Disability Studies: An Introduction
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Lecture - 26
Gender and Disability: Interviews with Prof. Nandini Ghosh

Hemchandran Karah: Hello welcome all again, this time a very important topic Disability and Gender. I call it forms of violence disabled women and research methods and interview with Prof Nandini Gosh. Well we have here on board Professor Nandini who has done extensive work on disability and gender. The highlight about her work is a caring and an intense ethnographic approach to her field and she has got into very fundamental issues about ethnography and also highlight the true aspects of say violence in intimate spaces ok.

In the process what also transpires is a sophisticated disability informed feminist epistemology. Thank you Nandini to come on board here welcome please say a few words about yourself and so that we can carry on to that.

Nandini Ghosh: Thank you Hem. Actually I mean you have introduced me to a certain extent. I am basically at the moment working as assistant professor at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata which is basically a research institute works on different issues of around development. So, gender, health, education etcetera.

My core concerns are looking at intersectional identities. So, I look at disability gender, gender caste, these kind of identities and we here we teach here M Phil course on development studies where I keep sociology gender studies, marginalization etcetera and we also have a PhD program in development studies here, that is basically what I am doing at this moment, but I have come to this field with extensive background of doing development work at the grassroot level and then converting that into academic engagement.

HK: Great. So, let us begin with in what way disability complicates the fieldwork experience when it comes to gender Nandini? Maybe we can begin there and then carry on.

NG: Can I clarify the question if you do not mind?

HK: Sure.

NG: I mean if you talking here about a disabled researcher who goes into the field to this do gender research or you talking generally about the field how gender disability get complicated?

HK: No I am talking about the field.

NG: The field whenever researcher goes into the field.

HK: Yeah and disabled women in particular about the disabled researcher will come to it a bit later.

NG: Fine.

HK: Yeah.

NG: Yeah. So, I can start with my own experiences, but I will expand it a little bit more.

HK: Sure.

NG: See when you going to the field to research lives disabled women, if you go from with gender perspective or even when you go with the disability studies perspective, you are already kind of sensitized to the questions of power that could be there that power of its in all kinds of relationships, but when you approach the women in the fields actually the first thing that comes to your mind is the mundaneness of their existence, the mundaneness of their everyday existence which is quite similar to the lives of other women in the community, but also very different in a lot of ways.

So, the fact that they are engaging with household chores, they are engaging with domestic work, many of them are also going out to work in order because they are these are from rural areas if you go these are poor women. So, they have to if they are not severely disabled they are going out to work, they are working in different kinds of spaces.

So, there is a mundaneness to their everyday existence, but then you find out the nuances where you see and this everyday existence is in complicated by both the disability and by their gender because why it is complicated is the fact, that having say a locomotor or a

visual disability in a rural area and engaging with everyday domestic work with terms kind of a very difficult task for them like if you have to go to the say pond to wash your clothes.

So, for a locomotor woman to go down to a pond to wash her clothes and bring back a bucket full of washed clothes for a visually impaired woman also to do similar kinds of things is really a difficult task. So, the pressure of the domestic work and the complication of their impairment, come together to have a double effect on the lives of these women. In terms of gender yes we there its handle with these talks because they are women disabled men in the community do not really have to engage with these kind of tasks in a similar manner.

They are moved for people who are cared for cater to help to dress, help to take a bath etcetera whereas, disabled women are also depending of course, on the degree of their impairment also in encourage to be as independent as possible and they can at least of the domestic work so, that other people in the family are free to go out and do other kinds of work.

HK: So, in given this condition what is the work?

NG: Yeah.

HK: What is their connect with things like domesticity and intimacy?

NG: Yeah that that is a very complicated thing see I believe hem that there are two levels operating here always ok.

HK: Ok.

NG: So, what happens is at one level say at the left practice. They are always engaging in domesticity.

HK: Ok.

NG: But if you look at the community their families and the way in which they project the ideologies, they are always said to be not really in the domestic.

So, there is this kind of an ideological belief system that says that because you are a disabled woman, you cannot engage with the domestic.

So, you are incompetent in terms of handling the domestic work in taking care of the family, in even in your function to reproduce next generation.

So, there is an ideological mooring that says that you are incompetent for all these range of domestic work.

That is usefully assigned to women. On the other hand if you look at the level of practice, except for say marriage you will find a lot of women actually engaging in all these kind of activities. But there is that is a very sad thing where the practice does not really feed back into the ideology. So, despite the fact that they are part of the domestic sphere, it does not feed into changing the ideology which really says that which keeps on saying that they are incompetent and incapable.

Now, when you come to questions of intimacy and that is where it becomes even more complicated because at one level you will find very few disabled woman who are married.

In the rural areas we still find disabled women who are married, but the little the engagement that I have had with them questions of intimacy really do not cater to the wishes of disabled women.

And women say that you know they are subjected to sexual activities by their husbands they are forced into such activities by their husbands. So, I mean also like many people, many women have told me that, I cannot refuse sex because what if he leaves me.

So, it is kind of a payoff that because I kind of bribe her to keep on staying with me. And therefore, I never refuse sex to him.

There is this kind of a thing the there are other women also who say that you know husband has the right to have sex with me anytime and every time he wishes. So, so I do not think there is a lot of intimacy as and if you talk about the emotional connect.

But yes there is a lot of subjugation in terms of sexual.

HK: Sexual, yeah.

Domination by men.

While you say this there is also good amount of scholarship, feminist scholarship that says there is desexing going on in your own work this appears.

Women are seen to be asexual. So, on the one hand you have serious there private intimate violations going on.

NG: Yes.

HK: By way of male subjection subjecting women a disabled women; on the other hand you have them publicly seen within the non intimate spaces as asexual.

How do we understand this paradox?

NG: I do not think it is a paradox per se.

HK: Ok.

NG: I think there is an interconnection in the way in the ways in which these two things are extrapolated against each other.

HK: I see.

NG: So, on one hand there is an asexuality which I assigned to disabled people per but more so, disabled women.

So, you say that these people are asexual therefore, unable to reproduce therefore cannot be married off.

So, there is larger social attitude that promotes at this entire belief system. On the other hand this is there is the other side of it where there is rampant sexual abuse.

At the rampant sexual abuse actually is based on this social community belief system that says that because they are asexual no one will touch them so, a person who violates a disabled woman.

Really knows that they will get off easily, because no one is going to believe that they have violated a disabled women.

HK: A sort of non-wanted.

NG: Yes. Object sexual good object.

So, they should know it is also this discourse that says where there are so, many good women or a normal women around.

So, why would I touch you kind of a discourse?

HK: Correct.

NG: Ok.

So, but that itself becomes easy to ensure that you can violate these disabled girls because they come out even and say that we have been violated no ones going to believe them much.

And third part of this paradox is the hyper sexuality that is projected onto certain kinds of disabilities. Specifically if you sees a lot of deaf women are projected as being hyper sexual. A lot of intellectually disabled women are projected to be hyper sexual i a sort of not in control over their agency.

HK: Exactly.

NG: Ok.

Over the sexuality which is why they you know they would I mean in common language they would jump on any man whose around kind of a language.

That is used so, but the point is I think basically these are the two groups of women who have not who do not learn or who do not become coached in you know camouflaging their sexuality. One is because of I mean for both its because of communication problems.

It is because communication problems they do not necessarily invite the social norms to the extent that people who other people to therefore, they are probably freer in terms of expressing their sexual desire and that is the hyper sexuality tag comes in.

HK: Comes in yeah.

NG: So, it is that it is on one side you neglect the entire sexuality. So, by negating the sexuality you make it easy for people to prey on disabled girls and then if there is a complaint that comes out, you blame it on the hyper sexuality of the disabled girl. So, its kind of a triad that operates at the same time.

HK: So, what here as a subtext what I hear also Nandini is intimacy familial violence and patriarchy working together against disabled women's interest.

But what also comes across in your work and others is the state violence that goes she can jowl with this problem.

NG: Yes.

HK: Do you want to give us some examples so, that people know how exactly things under work under the surface.

NG: So I will give you kind of three examples of state violence.

HK: Carry on.

NG: And these are three disparate kind of events that happened.

The first issue that I would like to take up is the question of hysterectomies.

HK: Ok.

So, you know there have been cases from far back in 94 in our.

HK: Perhaps sorry for interrupt perhaps start with.

NG: Yeah.

HK: What is hysterectomy and then carry on.

NG: Ok

HK: Yeah.

NG: So, hysterectomy basically is a situation where women for a range of health reasons could have they uterus removed so, that they can live better ok. Now in case disability

what happens is the case what is stick to me specially for a lot a range of disabled women is that disabled girls have no control over their menstrual cycle, they do not know how to deal with it.

Therefore they should undergo hysterectomy so, that they do not have to deal with this painful side of their womanhood etcetera.

That is the logic and that is the area where the first violation and actually it was a state propagated violation that came to light, way back in 1994, but sometime in the 2000 again.

The both that cases it was in Maharashtra where there are institutions for intellectually challenged girls.

Actually petition the court to allow them to the first case they had actually perform the hysterectomies and ensure that these girls do not happy with anymore. In the second case because it was a little later. So, they petitioned the government saying that allow us to have these 10 or 12 girls to be then to have their uteruses removed.

As well as what this is basically state action is actually asking for infringement of the sexual rights of these women.

By removing their uterus you actually infringe on the sexual rights of these women, you take a judgmental position where you say these women have no right to reproduction.

And the thought is what you actually do is you promote abuse of these girls probably because once they lose their capacity to become pregnant, then there is no way in which people who violate them can ever be caught.

HK: Correct.

NG: So, this is where the state actually was promoting sexual violence against women with disabilities who were in their custody and they had actually co opted the parents also and the parents are given written statements and saying they are accepting this and a lot of parents still do talk about hysterectomies for that specially the intellectually challenged girls the severely disabled girls etcetera. So, this was one case of state infringement of their sexual rights of disabled woman.

The second case that came up was a case which was in Chandigarh.

HK: Ok.

NG: And this was this girl with intellectual impairment, who had been living in a state run institution.

And she had been physically violated raped by the security guard of the institution and had become pregnant.

HK: Ok.

NG: So, this government home went to court saying that because she is an intellectually disabled woman.

She is unfit to be a mother.

And then the court should allow her to abort the fetus. So, this second case and this was actually taken by a lot of activists, what was very strange is in this entire case was that there was hardly any talk about the violation that had happened. It was a state which had the custody of the girl the state was here the protector of the girl, and yet the people who were supposed to protect her were the people who had violated her. There was no discourse around this the entire discourse was around whether a intellectually challenged girl has the right to be a mother.

And so, while on one hand there is the state which protects or promotes the right to motherhood.

It was here infringement on this girl's right to motherhood.

HK: Correct.

NG: And there was this entire debates about whether she would be a good mother, how she would been take care of the child etcetera. So, this was a second area where you have the state really working against the rights of the disabled woman, the third violation that I will talk about.

Is a in a non state institution, but the state really had a major role. It is just home in West Bengal outskirts of Kolkata where a lot of women with psychosocial disabilities were housed.

Now this home was actually being used as a den for sexual violation of women.

HK: I see.

NG: So, at night a lot of men would come in they would have sex with these women. .

And because they were supposed to be insane not psychologically stable. So, they were then chained up and subjected to us range of violations both physical and sexual and what happened this there were some deaths which happened in this institution.

And the death quickly covered up by burring the women within the campus of the institution.

HK: I see.

NG: Now state was very interesting here the state had actually two things here to do.

One the stick was actually referring cases of when women with psychosocial disabilities were found homeless, the state was taking them into the custody and sending them to this home.

So, what was they were sending the women actively to this home they were supporting them financially, but what they were also lacks in is the monitoring role that if I have sends 10 women to this institution I have a role to find out periodically how these women are doing.

NG: Correct.

And I do not know there must have been some corruption in the process etcetera, but the state had completely turned its face away from this institution. So, there was a lot of sexual violence going on there.

Now, what happened is at a certain point of time I think 2008-09.

Some of the residents they somehow scaled the wall and ran away and they told the villagers nearby about their plight.

HK: I see.

NG: As it came to wall light and when the police went into the campus they found women in different very pitiable conditions very different ways in which they had been violated and actually I think they dug up some six skeletons from the campus of the women who had been buried in the last few months.

So, this was the other case where you. So, see where the state is supposed to be the protector or the state who is supposed to uphold the rights of women.

Actually becomes the people who violate or infringe on the rights of women. So, this is entire. So, the desexing the hyper sexuality etcetera discourse is all brought into play in terms of the state also and the way it treats women with disabilities.

HK: Yes I can see that because if not for the circulation of these discourses such things will not be prompted in the first place actually.

NG: Exactly.

See that make us move to an important problem of researching this problem see.

HK: Yeah.

NG: Very popular method research method which is standpoint epistemology where one talks about the voices of the marginalized, speaking for itself the voices speak and then that becomes a powerful method to inquire about the narrative diversity of voices from the margins ok so, that seems to be feminist a.

HK: Yes. Very powerful tool actually.

NG: Yes.

HK: But you have inquired into such range of violence, ranging from unstateable invisible violence to open public violence. So, where this is standpoint epistemology stands? I meant to play or the make a pun on the word.

NG: Yeah see.

For the feminist perspective yes we do talk a lot about standpoint epistemology.

And we think that it really brings into the process of research more egalitarian way of doing research.

But again when you go and you start researching lives of disabled women and there are very pertinent areas where standpoint epistemology can become problematic in terms of disability research. One is this entire area of communication itself because the within disability there are certain groups with whom communication is really direct communication is very problematic.

Suppose like I am talking about the easiest group is the deaf women.

But then we do not have the same sign language many of these deaf women are not even trained in any kind of formal sign language. And then becomes communication itself becomes a major problem.

They are proposed these groups of women who are so, called deprived of legal capacity. So, the intellectual disabilities in the psychosocial disabilities, because if they are not seem to have legal capacity how do they represent themselves?

To what extent can they represent themselves?

So, this becomes the other barrier in terms of engaging more firmly with the stand point epistemology.

But the other point hem that is when you go to the field in terms of fieldwork what becomes really important.

Is this the notion within feminist standpoint epistemology is the question of raising of consciousness is not it?

HK: Yeah.

NG: Ok. So, how do you raise consciousness among disabled women?

When you go on go to the field and you are talking to these women and really there is very little that you could not do to change their circumstances, then how far do you take this consciousness raising ok. The other point is even in terms of consciousness raising and that is where the standpoint epistemology, I think become a little bit problematic for me I think.

Because see I was speaking to this women.

And they was saying we stay in the home and we stay in our fathers' home and we will be here as long as my brothers and their wives allow me to do that.

And I was telling them that you know women have equal rights to the natal property.

And they said yes they have right, but it does not happen like that here in the community.

In the village. So, what do you do then?

What do you do then yes?

How would you cannot intervene into each lives there.

HK: Correct.

NG: You cannot the other point is what seems to me as say a patriarchal domination.

Was a lot of them away of life.

HK: Correct. Ok.

So, how I mean then what is the standpoint that you are representing?

If I represent my standpoint yet it is patriarchal domination, which is say discrimination of disabled women, but when you take their standpoint then for them this is the way of life.

NG: Correct. This is this is the situation in which they are a managing the best that they can. Compromising in different ways, working in different ways to question norms, but not really overturning the way things are. So, I mean that is where the standpoint epistemology then really emerges with some kinds of limitations. Because see

consciousness raising I raise the consciousness of a lot of women through the conversations that I had with them.

I help them to understand that what was actually discrimination which they had not previously recognized as such.

This what do I leave them with? I leave them with a lot of discontent with about their own situation and nothing much more.

So, that is where you know I mean because then unless you can connect research with some kind of a notion for change which actually brings changes into lives of women I think research per se will fail. Because in a lot of cases like this you will need to have more action oriented research also.

HK: Consciousness raising you said what you left with them, but what did they leave in you a sort of a cathartic experience or your own discomfort with your privilege ethics of research, I am sure many things triggered in yourself.

NG: Yes.

HK: Maybe can you walk us through little bit on that.

NG: Yeah see what this interaction with the women that I have had over say a very long time as a researcher.

As actually I mean opened my mind my eyes and my mind to a lot of things. For one thing that really comes in is the ease with which they accept you.

HK: Access what?

NG: Is the ease they accept the researcher.

HK: Ok.

NG: The ease with which they accept you and if you can really build a good rapport with them the kind of information that they really shared with you and then it is a responsibility of you what you do with that information.

HK: Correct.

NG: How you engage with the information, how do you represent that information to the outside world. How do you represent the situation and thus the information to the outside world.

One is this thing. The other is you know because with this women the other thing that really struck me is every time I started off with a girl, they say what do you want to know from us we are such simple people, we do not have knowledge and then the next journey was such a revelatory journey.

Well we co produced a lot of knowledge in that process. So, its not just me producing the knowledge, it was both of us in that process of talking to each other that we co produced a lot of knowledge. The other thing and this really relates to the ethics of research is the question of power because; however, much we say that and in feminist epistemology we talk about power to the voiceless and all that.

HK: But you paralyze that within this relationship of the researcher and the research, there is an innate power dynamics that is at work all the time.

NG: See only what happens is when I went in to do the research, I was the researcher they were the research.

HK: That is right.

NG: So, they were that then they thought that I was more knowledgeable than them.

They thought that they were such simple people what could I learn from them. .

This was the third thing.

But then there was also acceptance of me in a similar way. So, you know like you are like us.

HK: Correct.

NG: You also have a problem I also have a problem. So, there was a similarity in that connect that you are also similar to us and this is why probably they really opened up a lot, but then I was also aware of the differences.

But I had a privileged background.

I had access to education, I had access to resources which put me in a privileged position in contrast to them.

So, you know so, how do you manage this in terms of the relationships and I will give you like one a small example here.

HK: Sure.

NG: There was this girl who was being hounded by her brothers.

Because did not want to share the natal property with her.

And she was a little bit more socially conscious. So, she knew that she had share in the property family property. So, what they were doing is then and this is a this is a very basic tool that is used in the rural communities to ensure that disabled girls are do not get a share.

What they did very nicely was they planted rumours in the village.

That she was a girl of low moral character.

HK: I get that.

NG: That she was having affairs with people.

Etcetera and in this process even the gram panchayat people turned against her.

HK: I get that.

NG: The people who had supported her claim to the natal property between where the people who turned against her.

So, for me the dilemma was I supported her in getting to the police station and lodging a complaint etcetera, but then the question is really here is how far more could I support her.

HK: Correct.

Was it possible to take her out of the community there are no women's hostels anywhere.

So, what is the extent that I can support her? So, you know this kind of that is where the ethics of the results.

Somehow as to now then extend towards larger questions of support systems, larger questions of action oriented movements that will help these women in the communities.

HK: Wonderful we are a bit oh short of.

NG: No time.

HK: Yeah.

NG: Yeah.

HK: Half an hour, but you know Nandini the way you stopped finally, about where do we stop in this in ethnographic research when you just muddy the water and pull away.

NG: Yes.

HK: Or carry on and until what extent they can I think this is the question one keeps asking and one should keep asking and solve for oneself while being a researcher and

NG: True.

HK: Student or even just a fact of being a human you know.

NG: Yes.

HK: Thanks so, much Nandini I am sure everybody got lots of things, but quickly though from your research thank you so, much.

NG: Thank you so, much.

HK: Yeah.