

Geo-Reflections Series-4

Claiming Space: Locating Women in Indian Geography

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Introduction

One of my colleagues, who has a great sense of humour, often jokingly calls me 'Danger Geographer' by twisting the term 'Gender Geographer'. I do not mind when he says this because I know he does not intend to insult me and says it as a joke. However, the term seemed intriguing to me when I first heard it. The term would not leave my mind, haunting me whenever I thought about claiming gendered space within the discipline. I tried to understand where exactly is the 'danger' in claiming gender as an intrinsic matter of Geography discipline. Doesn't Geography treat human society as the core of its interests? Or does patriarchy, as in all other cases, trigger the perception of gender as a problematic issue? Does gender threaten to destabilize the 'all is well' kind of status-quo thinking that still exists within our discipline? I dig deeper into the 'danger' to answer these questions in this article. I do so by exploring how gender concerns do indeed destabilize many well-established (and often rooted in patriarchal) norms and beliefs within our adored discipline.

At the beginning of this article, I must state that I have never experienced any discrimination in the Department of Geography of The University of Burdwan as a woman academic. I am not a victim of patriarchy within this context. However, the fact that I was not a victim does not mean that patriarchy does not work within the disciplinary boundaries of Geography departments. The challenges related to gender within the discipline are often clouded by the 'everything is all right' kind of idea. This status-quo belief occurs because gender issues are not overtly expressed, discussed or manifested.

In most cases, even if women within academia experience gender-based discriminatory practices, they hardly ever raise their voices because of their middle-class identity, which trains them to conform to and maintain the status quo. Maybe they do not want to be marked as 'feminist', perceived as a problematic identity in India. Having lived experiences as a girl from a village and as a woman in Indian small cities, I have observed how gender-based injustices (read structural violence) work in our society and how middle-class women try hard to conform. Later on, as a professional within the discipline of Geography, I have also engaged myself in critically understanding the invisible components of gendered space and spatiality within the discipline. Here, I would like to say that the situation within Geography might not be very different from other academic disciplines in Indian universities. However, I am not going to discuss the situations of other disciplines as I lack enough experience in working in those specific spaces. As an insider, I can only comment on the discipline I am linked to—in teaching, research, and curriculum framing.

Two broader arguments frame this article: (a) high level of preferential treatment is given to men in recruitment policies despite the feminine character of the discipline from the perspective of students at the postgraduate level, and (b) there is gender blindness in the curriculum at the postgraduate level. From the websites of the Geography departments of premier Indian universities, I have collected secondary information on the faculty positions and postgraduate curriculum. I have emphasized the Geography departments of the 18 universities in West Bengal as I have some expertise in the ground-level situation. I have collected data on the women–men ratio (WMR) among 2nd semester Master's degree students in Geography at every university in West Bengal from the faculties of the respective departments by telephonic conversation, email, and WhatsApp correspondence. The same method has been applied to universities outside the state. In this case, I only received the average percentage of female and male students as their respective faculty members mentioned in those cases. That is why there might be a little approximation in those proportions, but I trust the data from faculty members who have been part of these departments for several years. A point to note: in this article, 'Geography departments' are used to mean the postgraduate departments of different universities.

'Missing Women' in the Geography Departments

Gender mainstreaming in the Millennium Development Goals and Gender Equality in Sustainable Development Goal 5 prioritize the increase in the proportion of women in leadership and decision-making through their presence in higher bodies of academia and policymaking. The presence of women in higher academic bodies of a discipline has a particular value. Gender balance, both in selection and nomination, is the desired goal of bringing about gender justice. There is a push from feminist organizations in developed countries to bring this gender justice to the highest level of educational institutions, i.e., the universities.

Although there is an ongoing debate on the association between women's presence in decision-making bodies and its impact on people in general and women or girls in particular, numerous studies confirm that the relationship is always positive. The status of women changes along with their higher presence in decision making bodies. There might be confusion on the issue of how I can compare university faculties with the members of policy and decision-making bodies. My argument, in that case, would be that they are indeed comparable. The future of Geography as an academic discipline lies in the hands of university faculty members who frame the curriculum at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels. The kinds of research carried out, the approaches followed, and the methods used by the university faculty also direct the development and set the future course of the discipline. From that perspective, the gender balance among the faculties is significantly important in a discipline like Geography, whose core interest lies in the production of space by human societies.

When I was pursuing my higher studies, Geography was perceived as a 'feminine' subject, a soft discipline for girls with better results to go into. In those days, it was primarily taught in girls' colleges in West Bengal. Consequently, the proportion of postgraduate students was heavily biased towards women. The women–men ratio was often 30:3, with the worst figure being 30:1 in some academic sessions in the early 1990s. Afterwards, many co-education colleges started

offering Geography as a major, and slowly the proportion of male students increased in the Geography departments. These newly created undergraduate departments also opened up the opportunity for jobs at a higher level than school teaching, which probably attracted more male students. In every sphere of work in India, we see more women at the lower levels, with their number decreasing in the upper hierarchies. However, despite this change, the proportion of male students hardly ever crossed the 50.0 per cent mark. When I joined the Geography department at the University of Burdwan in 2006 as faculty, there were more male students than during my time as a student. However, female students were still the majority group. The proportion varies from year to year, but women outnumber men if we take a long-term average. For instance, in the 2021–23 academic session, the WMR at our department at the University of Burdwan is 43:16.

As the number of universities increased in West Bengal in the last ten years under the new political regime, so did the number of Geography departments. All these new departments have something in common with the old Geography departments — there are more female students¹ than male students, and the WMR varies between 60:40 and 90:10 (Table 1). However, let's look into the gender-disaggregated database of faculty members of 18 universities in West Bengal. It is biased towards men (Table 1), which raises the question of where these missing women are going. As per my knowledge, women are very much present in the teaching faculties of secondary and higher secondary schools in West Bengal. After pursuing the Master's course, many women take up school teaching jobs and get married due to immense pressure from their parents. However, this does not mean that women are falling behind in pursuing PhD or MPhil degrees in Geography these days. They are fighting against all odds but not giving up on their higher education.

According to the University of Burdwan records, among MPhil students in the academic session of 2018–20, the WMR was 8:7. In the 2019–21 academic session, this ratio was 8:5. Most MPhil students from different universities are accommodated in PhD programmes in the current scenario. Even if we consider the possibility of an increased dropout rate among women at the PhD level, that alone cannot suffice to explain why their proportion has come down to 27% among university faculties. It appears that the backsliding starts at the recruitment level for college teachers. However, we still find many women faculty members at the undergraduate level in different Degree colleges. When it comes to the case of faculty at the highest level, however, women are grossly under-represented. Here the question arises, how come a feminine discipline becomes masculine at the top level? Where are made the decisions regarding teaching and knowledge production in Geography?

If we try to look into the gender difference between the proportion of male and female faculties of all postgraduate departments of Geography in the universities of West Bengal, the difference is enormous. Men occupy 73.0 per cent or roughly three-fourths of total full-time faculties, whereas the proportion of women has gone down to 27.0 or about one-fourth.

¹ Because of data limitations, I am treating all women students in one bracket without considering the intersectional differences under categories such as SCs and STs.

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Interestingly, this is the reverse of the situation seen with the proportion of female and male students. Cannot we call this a case of gender disparity? Is it not a clear case where patriarchy operates with its entire male bias in the recruitment process? Or is it a spatial hierarchy where the universities of Delhi, dominated by male students, get priority over regional universities in the recruitment process because of their higher social status and patronage of male networking? I do not have the answer, and I would like to invite young geographers to engage themselves in analyzing the reasons. While collecting this data and analyzing the reasons for the same, I also spoke to several young male faculties, seeking to understand their perception of this matter. After our discussion, they responded, "We never thought about it, but if you are telling us with the data, we have to accept the fact". Thinking about it some more, they added, "Probably it is thought that it is a field-oriented discipline, so men are more qualified." Through further conversation, especially considering that all-female college teachers undertake rigorous fieldwork and research every year, they realized how the patriarchal influence works to moderate their mindset.

Table 1: West Bengal: Gender disaggregated data on Geography faculties in the universities

Sl. No.	Name of the University	Total Faculty	Male Faculty	Female Faculty	Total Students	Female Students
1	Visva-Bharati University	7	4	3	54	35 (65)
2	Aliah University	7	4	3	50	32 (64)
3	The University of Burdwan	11	8	3	59	43 (73)
4	University of Calcutta	8	5	3	140	90 (64)
5	Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University	5	4	1	53	24 (45)
6	Diamond Harbour Women's University	6	5	1	60	60 (100)
7	Gour Banga University	5	4	1	29	10 (34)
8	Jadavpur University	3	2	1	16	12 (75)
9	Kalyani University	3	2	1	43	29 (67)
10	Kazi Nazrul University	6	5	1	43	36 (84)
11	North Bengal University	12	9	3	81	56 (69)
12	Presidency University	14	11	3	19	14 (74)
13	Rabindra Bharati University	1	0	1	84	60 (71)
14	Raiganj University	7	6	1	59	27 (46)
15	Sidho Kanho Birsha University	6	6	0	25	17 (68)
16	Vidyasagar University	6	5	1	78	48 (62)
17	West Bengal State University	1	0	1	38	23 (60)
18	Adamas University (private)	7	4	3	13	11 (85)
	Total	115	84 (73)	31 (27)		

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages

Perhaps it is our own mistake for not raising these issues to unsettle the situation within the discipline and consequently be perceived as a real 'danger geographers'. The male bias is a weapon with the help of which the patriarchy works. It works in the same way as other axes of inequality, such as caste and ethnicity, work by favouring one group and disallowing the other. Therefore, it can be claimed that it is a form of preferential treatment given to one gender within Geography academia. Such a situation reminds me of a similar kind of sexist attitude among the male members of the Indian Parliament. They were able to pass the bill for women's reservation in local governments but did not pass the same bill in the Parliament, which would have challenged their interests. Is it a similar kind of male bias which does not want to bring the

'danger' home to unsettle their comfortable existence? Or is it assumed that women are less capable than men of performing well in the highest academic bodies? To refute this notion that men are more qualified to be faculty in the Geography departments, I would like to raise two cases to defend my argument. In West Bengal, two universities -West Bengal State University, Barasat, and Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata (Table 1), have single-faculty Geography departments. Both are run by one female faculty member each, with the help of a bunch of guests and contractual faculties.

If we think that this gender disparity is limited to the Geography departments of the universities of West Bengal, the fact is 'not at all'. Suppose we look at the proportion of female faculty in 16 premier Geography departments outside West Bengal. In that case, the situation is not very encouraging, though it is a bit better than that of West Bengal. In the other Indian universities, the proportion of female faculty is only 29.0 per cent against 71.0 per cent of male faculties. This proportion does not even cross the minimum mark of 33.0 per cent, as conceived by the Indian Constitution Amendment Act (73 and 74) as a critical mass to have certain kinds of impacts on policymaking. Let's consider the proportion of female students in these Geography departments. It ranges from 60.0 to 80.0 per cent in different regional universities across India, irrespective of their location in the North, South, East, West or North-East (Table 2).

The only exception we found was in the universities located in NCT of Delhi, where the proportion of female students is between 40.0 to 50.0 per cent. From a gender perspective, the case for universities in Delhi is justified but from a different angle. In Indian families, boys get preferential treatment in terms of a) spending money for education and b) mobility to other cities compared to their daughters. Thus, although students from all over India go to Delhi for higher education, comparatively more boys get this opportunity in support and encouragement from their families to pursue higher education in universities located in distant metropolitan cities like the national capital. The male students also go to the universities of Delhi in preparation for other jobs such as UPSC. BHU and AMU, two other premier universities in the North, also have a higher proportion of male students because of their more extensive catchment. However, if we take the all-India average proportion of female students at the postgraduate level, it comes to 55.0 per cent. If we were to exclude the universities of Delhi, BHU and AMU on the grounds of having an all-India catchment favouring more admission of male students, the percentage would go up. Therefore, the data structure on students does not explain why there is just a 29.0 per cent presence of women among the faculties. A deviation in this general trend is only observed in Panjab University, where female faculty members are double the number of male faculty members. In that department, the proportion of female students has also increased from 40.0 per cent in the 1980s to 70.0 per cent.

Why Does it Matter, and Where Do We Stand?

Let us now come to the question: Why are there so many female students in Geography? We do not need to conduct much research to find the reason. Up to the undergraduate level, Geography is considered an Arts subject. We all know that women are more concentrated in Arts disciplines, irrespective of whether they belong to the Humanities or the school of Social Sciences. At the

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postgraduate level, Geography in most universities exists under the faculty of sciences. Still, both MA and MSc degrees are offered, depending on their degree at the undergraduate level.

Table 2: Gender disaggregated data on faculties of selected Geography departments in the universities outside West Bengal

Sl. No.	Name of the University	Total Faculty	Male Faculty	Female Faculty	Average share of female students (%)
1	Jawaharlal Nehru University	25	17	8	50.0
2	University of Delhi	11	8	3	40.0
3	Jamia Millia Islamia	11	7	4	40.0
4	Benaras Hindu University	20	14	6	25.0
5	University of Madras	4	4	0	60.0
6	University of Rajasthan, Jaipur	11	6	5	---
7	University of Mumbai	7	4	3	70.0
8	Savitribai Phule Pune University	11	7	4	40.0
9	Panjab University, Chandigarh	9	3	6	70.0
10	North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong	7	5	2	60.0-65.0
11	Gauhati University	11	10	1	60.0
12	Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli	3	3	0	50.0
13	Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla	4	3	1	70.0
14	University of Kashmir	9	9	0	--
15	Aligarh Muslim University	13	11	2	47.0
16	Chittur PG College, Kerala	10	8	2	80.0
	Total	166	119 (71.0)	47 (29.0)	

Note: Figures in parentheses are in percentage

Now the question arises, why is the issue of the 'missing women' important to look at, and why do we need more women in faculty positions, i.e., in decision-making bodies. The issue of 'missing women' is just a product of a slippery path which becomes more slippery for women who try to reach professional heights and find their path obstructed by the glass ceiling. Women also often bring a kind of 'danger', -the power of questioning traditional patriarchal and misogynist tradition-, in every walk of life. Geography is not an exception to that rule. Here, I do not claim that the mere presence of female faculty members will change the gender blindness within the curriculum and teaching modules within the discipline overnight. Still, I believe that it will have a long-term deep impact'- on the discipline by questioning and destabilizing the orthodox practices of pushing out the gender lens.

When we talk about gender geography, people start thinking that we are discussing an edge to the discipline, as a 'ledge of a window. We never think from the perspective that if we claim that human beings are at the centre stage of the discipline, how can the gender question be left behind! My further query about incorporating gender in the core course of the discipline is an eye-opener. It is only mentioned in most university curriculums in the 'Philosophy of Geography' section. There is no scope for excluding feminist or gender geography if we intend to include

critical geography in the curriculum. The credit allotted for gender in the syllabus is a minuscule fraction, which is difficult even to mention. It was only in a handful of universities, such as the University of Calcutta and The University of Burdwan, where we found gender in sections other than 'Geographical Thought'; of these two universities, Calcutta University is more inclusive of gender questions in their curriculum. Aligarh Muslim University and Bharathidasan University have mentioned gender under Social Geography in their curriculums (Table 3). To our utter surprise, we also find five departments where there is no mention of the term 'gender' anywhere in the entire curriculum of core courses.

Table 3: Mention of gender in core courses of selected Geography departments

Name of the University	Paper title	Topic
University of Delhi	1. Modern Geographical Thought	1.1. Feminist Geography
BHU	--	--
University of Calcutta	1. Philosophy of Geography 2. Historical and Political Geography 3. Social and Cultural Geography 4. Regional Geography of India	1.1. Feminist Geography, Geography of Gender 2.1. Gender; 3.1. Feminism 4.1. Gender Discrimination and Empowerment
University of Madras	--	--
University of Rajasthan	--	--
JNU	--	--
University of Mumbai	1. Socio-Cultural and Political Geography	1.1. Gender and Geography
The University of Burdwan	1. Recent Trends in Geography 2. Geography of Development and Political Geography	1.1. Gender Geography 2.1. Development and Gender; Gender-Based Inequalities; Women's Empowerment and Empowerment Policies in India
SBP Pune University	1. Geographical Thought	1.1. Geography of Gender
Presidency University	1. Philosophy of Geography and Geopolitical Issues	1.1. Geography of Gender
PU, Chandigarh	1. Geographic Thought	1.1. Feminism and Post-Feminism in Geography
NEHU, Shillong	1. Geographical Thought	1.1. The Gender Question
Gauhati University	1. Geographic Thought	1.1. Socio-Spatial Dialectic and Gender Perspective
Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli	1. Social Geography 2. Geographical Thought	1.1. Gender Discrimination, Empowerment of Women 2.1. Perspectives in Geography
HPU, Shimla	--	--
Jamia Millia Islamia	1. Evolution of Modern Geographical Thought	1.1. Post Modernism and Feminist Geography
University of Kashmir	1. Social and Cultural Geography	1.1. Gender Discrimination and Empowerment
Aligarh Muslim University	1. Social Geography 2. Modern Concept in Geography	1.1. Gender Inequality, Women Empowerment, Women Literacy and Health 2.1. Concept of Gender Geography, Feminism

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There are some universities where gender is offered as an optional paper. The University of Delhi excels among these universities, as gender is provided in many optional papers. However, my argument favours keeping gender in the mainstream in geography by including gender concerns in the core courses. Optional papers depend on the individual faculty and cannot have a high impact on the discipline's transformation. We have clear evidence of this as well. After the retirement of Professor Saraswati Raju, pioneer Gender Geographer of India, the optional gender course is not being offered in JNU any longer, although it began there.

The Methodological Fix and Epistemological Challenges

In most cases, Geography departments are part of the Faculty of Sciences in Indian universities, and we face constant pressure to prove scientific rigour in our discipline. Recently we have started following a new undergraduate syllabus where practicals have become mandatory for each course in undergraduate studies in Geography. To navigate this change, we have kept fieldwork as the required practical in those courses where we cannot find any alternative practical task. In this way, we get stuck at some points, but somehow, we make our way to maintain our position on the boundary between Arts and Sciences. Holding the idea of Geography as a spatial science is an important output in that direction. The focus in Indian Geography is mainly on the positivist approach, hypothesis testing, objectivity, universal model building, quantitative techniques, Remote Sensing and GIS, keeping geographers occupied at the level of understanding spatial patterns.

In contrast, Geography elsewhere is expanding and shifting more towards critical approaches, organizing research around central research questions, qualitative methods, and analytical understanding of built environments and lived experiences. Human society, built-up environments, and lived experiences can never be gender-neutral, and we are trying hard to understand them without access to appropriate tools. It is something like fighting a modern war with ancient weapons.

The feminist geographers are constantly questioning these epistemological and methodological processes.² After all, these old tools help us understand the visible patterns for sure, but not the processes that created those patterns. Delving deeper beyond the existing spatial pattern is the only way to make our discipline a viable contributor to the knowledge domain. The real world, which we are deeply interested in, is very complex, but we keep trying to simplify these complexities in epistemological practices because of methodological limitations. One of the primary reasons behind our reluctance to accommodate the gender question is the methodological fix. Gender cannot be mapped and quantified easily. It is also tough to draw the boundary between gender categories, which operate at a micro-scale, such as home and workspaces. In contrast, we are not yet ready to go beyond conventional tools like statistics and GIS mapping.

Hierarchy in knowledge production is another significant baggage we have long been carrying on our shoulders within the discipline. The epistemological processes are laden with

² Suggested reading: Lahiri-Dutt, Kuntala (2011) 'Doing Gender' in *Geography: Exploring Contemporary Feminist Methodologies*, in S. Raju and K. Lahiri-Dutt (eds), *Doing Gender Doing Geography*, Routledge, New Delhi.

such hierarchies. We are happy to use structured questionnaires to depict empirical observation, never considering that the structured questionnaire and bounded scalar response (1 to 10) are weapons to put the research participant in a subordinate position in producing knowledge. Moreover, the language we use in our research is also burdened with authoritarian terms such as 'sample'. Following the path of natural sciences, how can we define human research participants as a 'sample'? By using the term 'sample,' we cut down the possibility of contribution by our research participants in the epistemological processes. There are ample evidences like this, but my intention here is not to make a list. The point is that the patriarchy prefers the power hierarchy in knowledge production, and gender poses a real 'danger' by questioning those hierarchies in our teaching and research. Therefore, it is easier to keep tradition and convention alive to maintain the existing power structures, and in that process, it is safer to keep 'gender' away. However, feminist geographers are creating a change by asking for more reflexive methodologies for understanding everyday lives and experiences in analyzing spaces.

I am writing this series 'Geo-reflection' in popular mode and am trying to offer some food for thought which postgraduate students, research scholars, and young faculty members of Geography can debate on. I hope they will read this fourth article, think it over, and reflect on the age-old practices of perceiving gender as a ledge to the discipline. This is the only viable process to ensure the development of a discipline where we engage in identifying our problems and the ways to overcome them. This is how critical geography flourishes! In the end, I argue that gender is at the core of the discipline, and mainstreaming of gender is both essential and possible within the curriculum. This is a far more effective method, rather than focusing on feminist geography as one lens among others under the broad categories of critical geography and putting in the mere mention of women or gender in the curriculum.
