

The Cotton Spring

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The two-and-a-half-day workshop was “a liberating exercise”, as one women’s studies scholar and teacher remarked, filled with lively conversations with women’s collectives, sharing experiences and perspectives from outside the formal structure of the classroom and the curriculum. Conducted by Professor Vergès (Advisor) and Dr Aarti Kawra (Academic Director of the HaB programme), the workshop brought the everyday life of women seamlessly into the feminist scholar’s world and provided a shared space for reflection over common concerns and issues stemming from the region’s unique context.

Our discussions in preparation for the workshop with women of different tribes and communities in the Naga Hills and the Assam-Nagaland borderlands were initially to explore how traditional customs/practices and formal legal injunctions trigger and influence collectivisation among women in the region. My young and multi-tasking research assistant Tiachenla was largely the mover in Nagaland, without whom it would have been impossible to organise the event. Between Abantee Dutta, project associate and law researcher, and myself, some of the earlier frameworks and rationale of understanding women’s practices of resistance have since been reshaped by the revelations that unfolded through the workshop itself. However, the question that still remained pertinent and uppermost on the workshop’s agenda was: How do we do feminist methodologies in the specific context of northeast India without being limited by overarching theoretical prescriptions that typically direct many of our approaches to gender studies, and in particular women’s studies?

The workshop was flagged off by a plenary session at the Sudmerson Hall on 2 April 2018, where the background and intent of the HaB workshop –to revitalise and make relevant the teaching and learning of women’s studies courses for and by women in the Northeast –was officially recognised by university officials, especially by the newly appointed Vice-Chancellor and the Registrar of Cotton University. It was followed by a lecture by Francoise Vergès on *Political Feminism in the Era of Femonationalism and Populism* to a packed room and eager audience that included many students and scholars from other small and big colleges and universities in Guwahati and beyond. The public session sent out a clear message to all those present that Cotton University was indeed ready to be the initiating platform for curricular reflection and change in gender studies in the cluster of institutions of higher education in the northeast of India, and for the implications for allied research.

Kheshili Chishi, a tireless peace worker from Kohima in conflict-torn Nagaland, whose drive and commitment was largely responsible for mobilising two dozen women via overnight train journeys from the Naga Hills to Guwahati, exemplified the urgency and spirit of shared purpose that brought the 70 participants together in the workshop. Kheshili, one of the front-runners in the *Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR)*, a civil society collective of the state rooting for peace with the Indian government, remains a major resource for the current project on women’s mobilisations, and has brought the author in touch with several grassroots people whose stories and struggles give flesh to a proposed publication under preparation as part of the HaB programme. Entitled, *The Little Book of Women’s Practices from Assam and Nagaland*, the volume is envisaged as a handbook of women’s individual and collective practices in the everyday, both in confrontation and collaboration with state, society and family. One that

Early April 2018, and the corridors of Cotton University in Guwahati, the capital city of Assam, were abuzz with a burst of energy and gathering of women in the central conference hall of the 117-year old institution, to participate in a workshop on ‘Feminist Methodologies’. The event was occasioned by the northeast India project of the IAS-coordinated programme *Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World (HaB)*, undertaken by the author to explore how the experience of women’s mobilisations for peace via diverse civil society agents in recent times, in Nagaland and Assam, could enter the discourse and practice of women’s studies courses in the region.



Workshop participants

could feed into larger paradigms of women’s studies programmes elsewhere. Articulating the experience of being a woman in Assam and Nagaland, the handbook will document women’s decisions, personal and public, in the specific cultural and political context and history of the region.

Beyond home and family

The Cotton workshop was in recognition of this ongoing work of women’s collectives in the region. It was a coming together of women from various orientations, both academics and members of civil society groups. As the workshop processes unfolded and participants listened to the experience of –in the words of renowned feminists from across the world– “being (conscious) in the world”, their reactions ranged from sheer wonder to euphoria and realisation of a unity across geographies. This knowledge provided participants with novel ‘ways of seeing’ their own positionalities and endorsed the local and contextual as being uppermost for rethinking the discourse and practice of women’s studies in the region.

The participants comprised women from academia, including IIT Guwahati, Gauhati University, North Eastern Hill University, TISS, Northeast Studies’ Regional Centre and other colleges and collectives, as well as independent researchers, unaffiliated but passionate women, and a few activists that also included some ardent MA students from the English department of Cotton University, and happily for me, my dynamic young colleagues Pallabi, Raa and Risha. The workshop’s activities enabled and echoed the participants’ own lived situations, inspiring a sense of purpose towards decision-making and change, together with the recognition that gaining knowledge about one’s own experience and positionality in the present is empowering in itself.

A number of exercises were deployed to enable sharing in an atmosphere of conviviality and exchange. The workshop began in the afternoon of April 2nd with the ‘Who are we?’ exercise of mapping one’s home and introducing oneself as though ‘to a friend’, using small photos and index cards on a wall map showing the northeast region of India, followed by individual accounts of ‘How we define ourselves socially’ outside and beyond the home and family. The next day, Francoise led the first session on women’s work, titled, “Who is caring and cleaning the world?”, during which the individual and collective hours of work were calculated to bring to the fore the mental load carried by women in society today.

The afternoon session of day 2 reiterated the need to interrogate crystallised constructs of ‘gender’, ‘custom’, ‘tribe’, ‘communal identity’, ‘the Northeast’, and ‘nation’, that define and intersect the experience of being ‘woman in Assam and Nagaland’. Francoise helped us inquire into the notion of ‘gender’ in its Western definition, and to challenge it for being too narrow and thus too poor to truly account for the multiple ways in which women experience their identities, roles and belonging to a place. Aarti proposed the idea of interrogating the discourse of place-based identities and local pasts or lived histories, and of becoming a researcher, activist in defending one’s own sense of place. She discussed the idea of expanding the notion of value to resist the logic of monetary value via price and a utility and introduced the idea of custodianship and inalienable value to complement the rights-based approach to natural resources, including flora and fauna, property, skills such as weaving, dyeing and bamboo construction, and other material agents of sustenance and cultural reproduction.

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Dare to think, dare to imagine

The last day of the workshop featured several break-away sessions to discuss ‘Utopian thinking in a changing world’ in order to realise a shared manifesto that stressed the need to go beyond traditional patriarchal norms to explain the violence of men against women. What emerged was the need to inquire into the irreversible structural changes –political, military, ecological, economic –that were responsible for the emasculation of men in the borderlands by the actions of the state. This was followed by an individual story-board exercise, titled, ‘I/We dare to think, dare to imagine’, during which participants used dry pastels on black chart paper to create visual representations of womanhood from their own vantage points. It resulted in a spectacular wall mural that further enlivened the workshop space, already adorned with flowers and textiles in bright colours.

The final session was a reflection and high tea with the Vice-Chancellor and Registrar of Cotton University, who were more than just enthusiastic about the curricular outcomes of the workshop. It was exciting to see that the Cotton University administration was already thinking of rolling out courses at three different levels for the coming semester. It was proposed that we create an inter-university group to build an add-on course for non-university students as an introductory methodology course for all undergraduates across disciplines, as well as a postgraduate course at the master’s level in women’s studies.

The workshop was a reminder of the recurrent need to mobilise academia-society linkages under one common platform. And for women’s studies to celebrate womanhood (not simply the white feminist variety) while reminding us that being woman awakens the need to go past the discriminations and totalisations that erase the sense of imagining the self as being human in the world. The convergence of ideas, ontologies and epistemologies towards this end came alive as a resurgence of women’s voices, scripting a new narrative in the history of gender studies and approaches in this region, home already to several women’s peace movements and interventions in what has long been regarded as India’s troubled eastern frontier.

From some of my earliest imaginings about documenting and archiving a women’s movement in India’s northeastern peripheries (during the Chiang Mai kick-off of the HaB programme in early 2017 steered by Director Philippe Peycam’s indefatigable *joie de vivre*), the April 2018 HaB workshop on feminist methodologies at Cotton University seems to have made a few seminal strides in reconfiguring and repositioning learning and living with a real humanities approach to knowledge production and curricula development at the university. It is worth reiterating that the encouragement and unstinted support to the workshop by both its Vice-Chancellor, Professor Bhabesh Goswami, and its Registrar, Professor Shikhar Sharma, bring rich promise in formally forging the institution’s partnership with the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden, the Netherlands, which has taken off both in spirit and action with this interesting event at Cotton University. Dilip Gogoi from the Faculty of Political Science, my very competent co-convenor at Cotton University, silently assured me, every time I felt anxious about hosting a theory/praxis initiative of this kind, that we could certainly break out of the mould and make this novel workshop a real success. Spring is indeed here!

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