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# Feminist Pedagogy and Peer Relations in Women's Studies Classrooms: Reflections on Caste Inequalities in Indian Higher Education

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**Abstract**

This article attempts to explore the nature of peer relations across caste locations in higher education in the Indian context and the possibilities of pedagogical intervention in caste inequalities in the classroom. Much of the discussion around caste in Indian higher education has been limited to questions of access of marginalised caste groups alone, without taking account of the terms of this "inclusion" and the conditions of survival in higher education. With the shifts in the caste composition of students in recent decades, some reflections on the struggles of marginalised students have come forth, highlighting the extent to which the higher education system is ill-equipped to deal with a diverse student body. Based on a qualitative study of five degree programmes in women's studies, the article discusses peer relations in the context of efforts of women's studies teachers to intervene in the dynamics among students given the varying degrees of diversity in the classroom. Highlighting bitter divisions as well as attempts at solidarity among students across caste locations, it argues that addressing peer inequalities in the classroom must be part of feminist pedagogical work. Furthermore, these strategies must go beyond "enabling" marginalised students and equally directed towards questioning the privilege of dominant students, otherwise the classroom will not be enabling for the best of marginalised students.

**Keywords**

Caste discrimination, higher education, feminist pedagogy, women's studies, peer relations

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## Introduction

Questions of caste within higher education in recent decades have usually found space through discussions around reservations in admission—the debates around the Mandal Commission's recommendations for reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBC) in employment and education, when these were implemented in public sector employment in the 1990s; and then in 2006, when the OBC reservations were sought to be implemented in higher education (also popularly known as Mandal II). Inevitably, these battles also (re-)generate questions about the need for reservations at all, including the already existing reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). The opposition to reservations in higher education—often from "eminent" scholars[1]—has meant that debates have been persistently focused on whether or not reservations are required and if so, what the best modes of implementation might be. As a consequence, much of the scholarship on the subject has been limited to questions of access of students from marginalised caste groups. There has not been a commensurate reflection on the conditions of survival and experiences of marginalised students once they are enrolled in higher education.

The structural deficits that students face once they have entered higher education are largely neglected (Xaxa, 2002; Deshpande, 2016). It is student suicides that bring attention to caste discrimination but not much is known about the institutional cultures of higher education institutions that lead into such extreme consequences. Some critical insights into these institutional cultures with respect to caste have much to say about the conditions of survival in higher education—discrimination and resistance to discrimination both emerge in these accounts (Sukumar, 2013, 2022; Singh, 2013; Kumar, 2016). Yet it is clear that the systemic bias against the marginalised is significant, and resistance itself can prove detrimental to the interests of these students. Reservations thus are merely the beginning of story of inclusion and democratisation.

Through his experience of teaching political science at the University of Delhi, N. Sukumar (2023) has drawn attention to the resistance of academic institutions to teaching Dalit Bahujan thought, and the deep resonance such courses have for students

[1]Two of the most well-known scholars to protest against Mandal II were Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Andre Beteille, who resigned from the National Knowledge Commission to mark their disagreement (Also see Mehta, 2006). However, these positions should be seen within the larger discourse of merit and quality in higher education debates. The higher education system in India has been described as facing a crisis by many scholars and commentators over the past two decades, but there is no agreement as to what the nature of this "crisis" is. Oddly, one framing of the "crisis" is about the "quality" of students. The issue of the "quality" of students, more often than not, is tied to the social composition of students, where quality of school education is spoken of with respect to students who enter higher education through reservations. This is part of a larger narrative where decline in the quality of higher education is posited against inclusion (Beteille, 2008) in arguing that the expansion due to "political pressures of inclusion" has meant compromising on academic standards. The framing of the "crisis" of higher education as one of "quality" has been questioned by Satish Deshpande (2016) as emerging from the fact that elite institutions are not equipped to deal with the kinds of students inhabiting them with greater diversity in student composition.

from marginalised social locations - precisely because these critical perspectives are completely absent in the rest of their curriculum. Thus, even as the social composition of students is increasingly shifting, the curriculum and the classroom continue to be alienating for students from marginalised caste and gender locations. In the American context, Victoria Reyes (2022) has brought out that despite the shifts in social composition of universities and the proliferation of studies of identity and marginalisation, the lived experience of scholars from marginalised social locations reflects how they continue to be "academic outsiders" through various subtle and unsaid exclusions. Such deeply ingrained, often subtle, forms of discrimination and exclusion in the context of caste inequalities in Indian higher education have been critically analysed by N. Sukumar in his incisive book *Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Universities: A Critical Reflection* (2022). Focusing on one aspect of how caste is experienced in the classroom, this article attempts to understand how peer relations evolve in increasingly caste-diverse classrooms of Indian higher education, and what role critical feminist pedagogical approaches can have to deal with inequalities among students.

The article has been drawn from my doctoral research that set out to study women's studies degrees programmes but I found that these programmes were considerably shaped by issues emerging from the shifting student composition in the post-Mandal II context. My fieldwork data sheds considerable light on this aspect, as students from marginalised castes spoke at length about their struggles to survive in a system which appears to be designed to push them out. My doctoral research studied MA and research degrees in women's studies at five universities across two regions—a state university (University A), a centrally-funded deemed university (University B), a non-metropolitan central university (University C), a metropolitan central university (University D) and a state university dedicated to the social sciences (University E). I conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with 163 students and 54 teachers at these universities over two years, 2016 and 2017. Broadly, the classrooms under study were of two kinds—either composed of women of various caste-class backgrounds; or composed of women from various backgrounds and men from marginalised caste backgrounds.

In the midst of my field work, the current funding crisis of women's studies was just beginning to emerge. The model of Five Year Planning was discontinued in 2017 under the present right-wing government; and since Women's Studies Centres are governed directly by the University Grants Commission their funding was tied to these Plans. Since then the status of women's studies has been precarious with some Centres being closed, and persistent uncertainty about the extension of funding to the existing ones. As Mary E. John (2023a) has noted of the National Education Policy 2020, despite the repeated emphasis on multidisciplinarity, women's/gender studies is not even mentioned in the document. In a recent volume on women's studies in India, Panchali Ray and Shadab Bano discuss with reference to the present government:

> [T]hough the UGC has extended support to the WSCs, it emphasises workshops, training, and gender sensitisation programmes at the cost of teaching and research. The trends in the development agenda set by transnational think-tanks (World Bank, United Nations and the International Monetary Fund) have seen a shift, with gender-mainstreaming as a core component in their various policies. However the focus is not to question patriarchy, but to use a language of empowerment that reflects the country's aspirations to be an equal participant in the global order with developed nations. Nowhere has the appropriation of women's studies to suit the ends of the hegemonic social order been more apparent than the attempt at renaming 'women's studies' to 'women and family studies' in 2005. (Ray & Bano, 2024, pp. 4–5)

Thus it is important to bear in mind that the marginality that women's studies as a field faces in Indian higher education conditions the possibilities of enabling feminist pedagogies, when it is constantly in danger itself.

With the implementation of the Mandal II (OBC) reservations since 2008, classroom composition in all five of my field sites has come to display growing social diversity as the enrolment in reserved seats has picked up some pace in the past decade. Thus as questions of location have become sharper across universities because all classrooms are increasingly required to respond to the changing composition of students, for women's studies this effectively means that the classroom is critiqued much more, particularly from an anti-caste perspective. It is also significant to note that the fieldwork for my doctoral research, beginning in January 2016, happened to coincide with Rohith Vemula's death and thus this immediate context meant that the visibility and articulation of caste issues within higher education was much more across the duration of fieldwork than it had been previously been.[2] This also meant that students across caste backgrounds were more willing to speak to me about these issues than would have otherwise been the case, given my dominant caste location.[3]

Effectively then questions of caste within women's studies classrooms have emerged in much sharper ways since 2016, even though women's studies as a field has been focused on inequalities in higher education throughout, and often degree programmes attempt to align pedagogical strategies to feminist principles. The academic commitment to critical thinking in feminist classrooms appears to produce expectations of critical education, centred on ideas of feminist pedagogy. Thus the ideas discussed in this article can be significant for other fields/disciplines that aim to teach critical thinking, particularly its relation to the social composition of the student body in higher education at present.

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[2]In some of my field sites, questions of caste already had a significant presence in the university on account of regional and institutional histories but this was not true for the rest. In these remaining sites, it was after January 2016 that the caste question was acknowledged more visibly, though it had been raised in these campuses for many years prior to this. I found caste to be the central axis of discussions even in classrooms where the student composition was largely upper caste.

[3]I am a middle class cis-woman born into an upper-caste group of the Sikh community.

In the classrooms under study, pedagogical issues were much emphasised by respondents and within that, peer relations and the "failure" of feminist pedagogy to address classroom inequalities. Centring the experience of students emerges as a fundamental aspect of many writings on critical and feminist pedagogy, yet direct intervention in peer relations does not find much focus. Further, much of the reflection on feminist pedagogy has come from teachers of feminist/women's studies courses and programmes. This article seeks to understand the feminist pedagogical expectations emerging from students regarding pedagogical intervention in peer relations on account of inequalities of social location, focused on caste in this case. I rely primarily on the voices of students, but within the context of the pedagogical practices and expectations of teachers that, directly or indirectly, endeavour to initiate students into thinking about their social locations, privilege and marginalisation and what these mean for their classroom relations with their peers. Even when absent as an active pedagogical intervention, in most classrooms peer relations did emerge as a prominent concern. Some teachers also articulated an expectation that classroom teaching will impact how students from different locations engage with each other. Thus the article attempts to understand these expectations and question whether and how these can be addressed within the space of a degree programme.

The first section attempts to situate the question of intervention in peer relations within the existing scholarship on feminist pedagogy. The second section details the nature of peer relations across caste locations in the programmes under study, highlighting divisions as well as attempts at building solidarities. The third section discusses the dilemmas of intervening in peer relations as part of the feminist pedagogical work of women's studies teachers. This entire discussion on what feminist pedagogy has to do with power dynamics among students in the classroom is premised on an abstract idea of the (feminist) pedagogue. The social location and institutional authority of the teacher and how it is tied to the logic of our universities that are rooted in a mainstream epistemic model, limits such possibilities necessarily. However, this aspect cannot be addressed within the scope of this article, and has been discussed elsewhere (see Anand, 2024).

## Locating the Question of Peer Relations in Frameworks of Feminist Pedagogy

Much of the scholarship on feminist pedagogy in the Indian context has been by feminist sociologists (Rege, 1995; Chaudhuri, 2002; Chadha, 2016; Pujari, 2017; Rayaprol, 2011; Chari-Wagh, 2018). Rekha Pappu (2002), in pointing out the absence of pedagogical thinking in the founding period of women's studies, pre-empted the questions that have come to acquire significance with the establishment of degree programmes. She raised questions about the composition of students choosing women's studies, the impact the course has on these students and how questions of the personal and experiential arise within the women's studies classroom. Her questions about diversity and how difference comes to be understood in women's

studies particularly resonate with the deeply charged contentions around caste that have emerged in my field data. Sharmila Rege (2010a, 2010b) subsequently wrote of feminist pedagogy within women's studies programmes and the anti-caste framework of her feminist pedagogical thought intersects significantly with the views expressed in the programmes under study. The influences for most of these scholars have been Paolo Friere (1970) and bell hooks (1994). While the fundamental scholarship of hooks is useful to think about the pedagogical issues in women's studies classroom, Freirian critical pedagogy proves to be less directly relevant in its assumptions of universalist, abstract categories of teachers and students. Given that the pedagogical contentions are centred on caste in the programmes under study, I found critiques to critical and feminist pedagogies by Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) and Kathleen Weiler (1991) more relevant to analyse the ideas expressed by my respondents.

Across this body of scholarship on feminist pedagogy (Rege, 2010a; Chadha, 2016; Pujari, 2017; Ellsworth, 1989; Weiler, 1991), centring student experience and the authority of the teacher are the two fundamental aspects of such a pedagogical approach that came to be significant in the ideas of my respondents. In this article, I will focus on the ideas of student experience, especially difference among students.

The elements of pedagogical work that were specific to these programmes and tied to ideas of feminist pedagogy can be understood within two broad categories—the first pertained to teaching methods and the second to what I would term the ethical dimensions of the classroom. While teaching methods were tied to epistemic questions, these did often underlie ethical classroom practices. However, the ethical questions about questioning power relations in the classroom were emphasised much more by my respondents across the board. This ethical dimension of feminist pedagogy has to do with going beyond epistemic politics towards recognising social and institutional inequalities in the classroom and reducing hierarchy in peer relations as well as the hierarchy between teachers and students.

Thus, there is a set of ethics that the feminist classroom seeks to follow. With respect to peer relations, various kinds of group assignments are attempted by teachers across these programmes to sensitise students to their differences of location. Classroom exercises such as the privilege walk, assignments on analysing the student's own location and so on are also geared towards similar objectives. Another example would be the bridge courses at University A focused on English language skills that are meant to shift hierarchy between English and non-English medium students.

The underpinnings of these pedagogical practices are effectively rooted in a framework of critical education, even when this is not the explicit frame of reference, whereby the pedagogical intent is to enable students to locate their social positionality, understand the intersections of structures of marginalisation and privilege that mark their lives and accept that these unequal structures need to be transformed. These ideas emerged across all five programmes albeit in different and uneven ways. The epistemological politics that women's studies as a field claims thus leads to a necessary engagement with modes of transacting the said epistemic framework and its implications for institutional practices. Some women's studies degree programmes and

teachers engage with these aspects more directly than others, yet in all the locations such pedagogical intent and expectations are markedly present.

Globally, the question of difference in the classroom has been a potent one in recent decades. A recent pedagogical guide by the American psychologist Kathryn C. Oleson (2023), attempts to deal with the pedagogical challenges of diverse classrooms, particularly focusing on micro-aggressions related to social identities in the classroom and offering a model of "productive discomfort." The nature of issues she explores and addresses refer to higher education classrooms broadly; however for women's studies classrooms the questions become much more complex and charged because of the subject matter at hand. Feminist educators Susan Sanchez-Casal and Amie MacDonald (2002) note:

> One of the ethical challenges of the antiracist feminist classroom is precisely the absence of a comforting boundary between students and the object of study; the feminist classroom collapses the difference between learning about the world 'out there' and investigating how students' lives are implicated in that world—how the world 'out there' also operates in the classroom and turns students themselves into objects of study (2002, p. 5).

While their observation pertains to feminist classrooms in women's studies, ethnic studies and within disciplines, I find this aspect in the women's studies courses in my sample as distinct from feminist courses within disciplines. The proximity to the object of study in women's studies impacts this idea of critical pedagogy, i.e. of "identity" not only as object of study but also in terms of classroom dynamics and structural differences.[4]

[4]For the purposes of this article, I have used the framework of identity, referring to articulations of difference in the social locations of students, and their deployments of vocabularies of privilege and marginalisation to explicate these. In the larger doctoral project this article is drawn from, I located women's studies in relation to the framework of identity knowledges as put forth by Robyn Wiegman (2012) in the American context. There have been a range of discussions in recent years about the concept of intersectionality in the Indian context (see Mary E. John, 2023b for a critical discussion). However, it appeared less useful here since the discussion primarily relies on the sharp critiques of caste difference in the classroom that emerged in the interviews. As mentioned earlier, the classrooms under study broadly had two types of social compositions – one, only women students, from both dominant and marginalised castes, or two, women from dominant castes, and both men and women from marginalised castes. When it came to difference and associated contentions in the classroom, caste became the primary axis of analysis. Certainly the experiences of women students from marginalised castes would be marked by intersectional oppression, however this did not come through in my fieldwork as both men and women students from marginalised caste positions were focused on the caste-based tensions in their classrooms. It is also a strong possibility that my position as an upper caste woman would have made students from marginalised castes less inclined to discuss difference within; especially since, as I go on to discuss through examples, upper caste women in these classrooms often attacked men from marginalised castes on grounds of sexism and misogyny.

This is an aspect that does not find much space in the scholarship on feminist pedagogy I have cited, yet the concerns about peer relations were at the forefront of the meanings of the women's studies degree for students. Inequalities and divisions within a classroom are common enough in every discipline and every institution, everywhere. What makes it a concern here is the fact that a more egalitarian and less hierarchical peer group is expected to be an outcome of feminist teaching. What students term the failure of the building of "feminist solidarities" among peers is framed as a failure of the women's studies degree programme. Moreover, programmes such as those at University A and University E do state or aim for such objectives in their course descriptions. The problem here is twofold—one, the nature of friendship and peer relations within academic settings, two, the difference of social location among students that conditions these relationships. Of the former, there is globally some scholarship on the idea of "academic friendship"[5] and while I do think that the nature of concerns that students bring up requires an analysis of what friendship itself can mean within an academic institutional space, this aspect will not find focus here. This is because the question of peer relations in these degree programmes was framed by students much more in terms of social hierarchies and how the women's studies degree ought to enable them to build relationships with each other that reflect the idea of feminist politics that they study. There was also among teachers a concern as to whether and how students engaged with each other across social locations- whether it be an overt concern like group work exercises; or whether expressed by individual teachers as their frustration when observing discriminatory practices among students.

In order to understand how and why peer relations are an aspect of pedagogical intervention, an aspect of "centring the experience of the student" that needs to be highlighted is how experience as a category of pedagogical intervention is problematised by assertions of difference by students of women's studies. I now turn to these ideas of difference, focused on caste identity as they emerged in the classrooms under study.

## Divided Classrooms

As much as most teachers sought to push women's studies as an academic field, often they reported disillusionment with the pattern of "good" students from socially privileged locations understanding and prioritising academic debates and politics of knowledge production but displaying a gap between academic understanding and a sense of "real" understanding. These students were not focused on their privilege at any depth, nor did they question the tangible inequalities within the classroom. Thus the central thread of pedagogical failure here was the inability of students to engage with inequalities within the classroom on account of the structures of privilege and marginalisation constructing their social location and that of their peers.

[5]For instance Emmeche (2015), in a larger project to map the humanities in the Danish context, attempts to analyse academic friendship through various sites of collaboration and conflict. The study however looks at the subjects as socially unmarked.

Some teachers discussed how they found it problematic when students acquired the politically correct academic language of women's studies, but nothing further by way of critical thinking, nor any academic-political commitment. Among these teachers, a few also highlighted how political correctness in the women's studies classroom could limit possibilities of learning (T13, interview, October 7, 2016). Interestingly the axis/es of political correctness vary across locations. A women's studies teacher at University D found that the students acquired the politically correct language of academic feminism, so that questions, doubts or positions that may be problematic did not emerge in the classroom. Yet she noted greater slippages around caste as the women's studies classroom did not necessarily make explicit positions on caste, nor offered concerted training in thinking critically about caste in her view. In contrast to this, a sociology teacher at University A argued that an automatic policing of problematic caste positions occurred in her classroom due to her obvious anti-casteist position. She had been trying to understand how this limited her critical engagement with students in certain ways (T6, interview, May 3, 2016).

### *Conflicts and Discrimination: Caste in the Classroom*

In relation to a focus on identity in the academic debates in women's studies, the question of who is speaking in the classroom also acquires significance. Students who come from locations of privilege complained about having to be politically correct. In some instances, women students from upper caste, middle class locations expressed displeasure about the fact that they "have to be careful about what I say because of my privileged position" (R.E., interview, November 24, 2017), while some women students interestingly discussed how male students felt suppressed in the classroom, how they had to be quiet or speak in acceptable terms and how the discipline and classroom is "anti-men" (M.H., July 20, 2017; R.G., May 30, 2017, interviews). The male students in question however disagreed with such an assessment when they were interviewed. These examples of the privileged students claiming or being framed in a problematic discourse of "reverse discrimination" were not as frequent as I had anticipated—ironically, precisely because most students have picked up politically correct vocabularies. During the interviews there were often slippages - for instance, one student spoke at length about her upper-caste English-educated middle class privilege, the associated social capital, while another was very passionate in discussing the critical thinking she acquired from her women's studies degree and expressed a strong investment in the discipline. But neither student focused much on the rampant discrimination and inequality in the bitterly divided classroom and institution they belonged to. Thus I discovered that while students overtly acknowledge hierarchies in the classroom and discuss how marginalised students do not find as much space, a deeper look at their interviews indicates that the larger tone is either of a "saviour complex" or directly contradicts such claims.

This became most evident when hostile divisions were reported within the classroom in multiple batches across the field sites. In one such classroom, the divide was so severe that students were seated in two halves of the classroom—students from upper caste, middle class, urban, English speaking locations on one side and

the students from marginalised caste-class, rural, non-English education on the other. Such an overt expression of discrimination in a metropolitan graduate classroom today raises significant questions about the relationship between epistemological questions and pedagogical ones in women's studies.

In three field sites, there were particularly bitter divisions in almost all classrooms at both the Master's and research degree levels with contextual differences in the nature and degree of conflict. Broadly, the students reported contentions around location and privilege with classroom peer relationships becoming a competition of political radicalism centred largely on caste. Either the classrooms were divided along caste-language lines, where the numbers of SC, ST and OBC students were adequate. The alternative scenario was of students from marginalised caste locations being a minority in numbers in the classroom and upper caste students battling each other to emerge as better anti-caste "allies," in the process instrumentalising SC/ST/OBC students more often than not. I now discuss both situations through one example each, without identifying the institutions and classrooms involved.

Larger political questions structure peer relationships significantly, for instance, the question of upper caste students being good "allies" to anti-caste struggles emerges from taking positions on political issues, campus politics, decision making pertaining to their coursework, developing peer support systems and so on. With reference to course-specific decisions, in many classrooms, collective decisions about negotiating with teachers about timetable, assignments and the like led to verbally violent disagreements centred on caste. In a particularly extreme situation, one batch had two different class representatives as it became a question of caste and language based representation—one from the upper caste group of students and one from the group of SC, ST and OBC students. Some upper caste students felt that this led to a tense bifurcation of the classroom but did not constitute a resolution, nor were students making an effort to bridge the gap anymore; the division was just accepted as it is (S.D., September 19, 2016; A.Z., November 23, 2017, interviews). Yet other upper caste students downplayed the social divide in the classroom, stating that earlier natural affinities of background brought people together but now they were working together quite well (A.A., interview, November 24, 2017). The divide became even more charged and bitter when a Dalit male professor was accused of making sexist remarks by upper caste women students. The group of SC, ST and OBC students felt the remarks had been misreported and blown out of proportion and the accusations seemed particularly unfair and reflective of the casteist biases of the complaining students. Upper caste professors had not been similarly called out for sexist or casteist remarks. Thus it became a question of sexism vs. casteism and deepened the conflict. The group of privileged students moved between recognising their privilege and an invalidation of the privilege/marginalisation gap, with the general narrative as one of having "tried [to resolve the division] but it hasn't worked out." Among the students from marginalised caste locations (many of whom were also from rural and non-English educational backgrounds), most were associated with Ambedkarite movements and expressed strongly the divisions and discrimination they were facing in the classroom. Yet despite this experience of political assertion and critical understanding of power,

they were not actually able to *assert* themselves in the classroom and were silenced within that space almost entirely. Some were even apologetic about the divide in the classroom and what they perceived as their failure in trying to create harmony. One student discussed how perhaps they could not adequately understand the perspective of the dominant caste students either, while another went so far as to espouse a relativist view of experience, claiming that "all of us have different experiences that should be considered" in arriving at a resolution (B. H., interview, November 24, 2017).

In another institution in another city, one Master's classroom was found to be similarly ridden with conflicts around lines of location, privilege and power structures in the classroom. While these contentions were also focused on caste, language and whose voice found space in the classroom, the proportion of students from marginalised caste backgrounds was much lower than upper caste students and as it turned out, it became a conflict between upper caste women about how to "allow space for marginalised voices" in the classroom, what constituted casteism and so on, with the marginalised caste students in question largely becoming passive reference points (M. A., interview, August 11, 2017). Most of the upper caste women students described in detail the measures they undertook to reduce the space they took in class and how they were trying to "enable" marginalised caste students to assert their voice in the classroom (A.N., August 16, 2017; R.M., August 24, 2017, interviews); but some upper caste women students felt these attempts were patronising and problematic (C.Y., interview, August 17, 2017) and that the effort to truly work through the inequalities in the classroom was not sustained but just an attempt to claim radical political positions around caste (H.R., interview, August 17, 2017).

Beyond these contentions about location and representation in classroom dynamics, outright discrimination and insensitivity from fellow students found significance in the experience of marginalised caste students. These ranged from upper caste students denying help for something as basic as the class schedule, to something as vicious as victimising marginalised caste students and using the details of their personal lives to make academic arguments in public spaces about "how oppressed these poor women were," or worse yet questioning if they belonged in a women's studies classroom since they could not fit the feminist criteria of these upper caste students (P.M., November 29, 2017; P.K., November 25, 2017, interviews). Further, students reported how despite pointing out multiple times that they were unable to follow the class discussion in English and could follow the same arguments in the regional language, even in classes where both the teacher and almost all students were reasonably comfortable in speaking and understanding the regional language, the upper caste students continued to pursue discussions in rapidly spoken English. They did not even attempt to break things down in simpler English, or translate the main arguments, making marginalised students feel that these are deliberate attempts to exclude them and make them feel inferior (S.L., interview, November 25, 2017).

Thus across these institutions students from marginalised caste backgrounds vociferously expressed their pain at the everyday humiliation they faced on account of what they termed the hypocritical feminist politics of their upper caste classmates. They argued that these privileged students made high political claims in the classroom

and within campus politics, especially around caste in the post-Rohith Vemula time, but were discriminatory in practice and did not acknowledge their own oppressive practices (R.J., November 27, 2017; A.I., November 27, 2017; M.S., August 17, 2017, interviews). Indeed some believed that contentions over caste were overdone in campus politics and the classroom for instrumental purposes because they lacked "real" commitment to feminist ethics and politics and that upper caste students took advantage of the fact that they are better equipped to express the experiences of marginalised students on account of their social capital (A.I., interview, November 27, 2017). A few students also reported instances of privileged students giving a hard time to teachers from marginalised caste backgrounds, especially if the teacher was not proficient in English (T.R., interview, November 23, 2017). Similarly the case of the Dalit professor being branded sexist as discussed above was considered unfair and a case of "vilification" (A.P., interview, November 25, 2017). Students thus felt that women's studies also needs to take account of situations where students on account of social privilege can be oppressive towards the teacher coming from a marginalised location.

One student framed this as a "lack of reflexivity of privilege of those in women's studies" where the teachers were entirely focused on inclusion in the curriculum but not the exclusions and discrimination that privileged students practiced (T.R., interview, November 23, 2017). Some privileged students did not prioritise these questions like other students in their classroom, nor spoke about addressing them, even as they acknowledged the existence of hierarchies among students, and how they materially benefit from their social privilege (R.M., August 24, 2017; L.J., November 27, 2017, interviews). That these students were focused on women's studies as a theoretical enterprise meant that questions of the power dynamics of the classroom were theoretical problems of location and social capital.

## *Peer Support Systems in Unequal Classrooms*

In instances of efforts to develop peer support systems, results were mixed with caste locations determining much of the possibilities. One group's attempt at having reading groups to deal with the dense course material resulted in painful conversations about how privilege and identity were structural and so long as such structural inequality existed, the reading group effort was experienced by marginalised caste students as a patronising "favour" causing them deep hurt. The upper caste students in question expressed considerable agitation and emotional turmoil wondering "if they would ever be good anti-caste allies." The group however was driven by the persistent conviction of translating academic feminism into a practice of feminist ethics in their peer relations.

In two different institutions, there were reports of somewhat successful peer support groups across social locations in certain batches. The interesting point of difference was that in one case, such efforts occurred entirely outside the degree programme while in the other it was understood by students as an outcome of pedagogical intervention. In the first case, one batch of students across caste locations

was able to build a peer support group for academic work successfully and conducted reading and assignment discussions in groups. In their opinion, they collectively felt intimidated by the teachers and lost because of the interdisciplinary course content, so they turned to each other drawing on their relative strengths as individuals and in terms of their diverse disciplinary trainings. The group was emphatic about the fact that their successful peer support system was not forged by the course content or classroom teaching, besides the fact that the classroom teaching was difficult for almost all of them in various degrees (D. J., June 9, 2017; S.J., July 13, 2017, interviews). In another programme, students brought out how group assignments where they were deliberately put into heterogeneous groups enabled them to understand how people from different locations have their own strengths and problems and therefore to work with people from different backgrounds (M.N., September 5, 2017; H.U., September 7, 2017, interviews). This in turn impelled them to critically reflect on their own social locations and how that has determined their trajectories and their everyday (U.R., interview, September 7, 2017). For instance, an assignment in their Master's first semester course required them to trace their family histories and discuss them in groups to understand each others' locations and contexts and students described how such exercises helped them understand and look out for each other, such as stopping the teacher if a classmate is lost, translating arguments during lectures and so on (K.K., interview, September 6, 2017). One student argued that such pedagogical efforts helped them to understand "standpoint in practice" (H.U., interview, September 7, 2017).

Yet this pedagogical intent may not always translate into intended outcomes. In most cases, students are able to recognise and understand the structural difference in their locations but this does not necessarily translate into more egalitarian peer relations. What in a women's studies classroom makes certain students think about their own privilege in a "real" sense but not others? The question to ask here, if there indeed is a gap between what students understand quite well academically but not in some tangible social sense, is why this would be a concern for a women's studies degree and its possible pedagogical models? Should it not be enough to impart the academic understanding of social justice? As it turns out, apart from the concerns of feminist ethics that participants in a women's studies classroom may have, there are tangible ways in which such gaps play out in the classroom – and indeed impact the learning processes of students, both privileged and marginalised (any privileged student claiming reverse discrimination in a women's studies classroom cannot be understood to be achieving the intended learning outcomes!). The tense and unequal equations among students determine which students find space in the classroom. Feminist scholars discuss centring student experience as one of the foremost principles of feminist pedagogy as mentioned earlier. But it is equally important to think about which student experiences and voice claim epistemic and social space in the classroom. Ellsworth (1989) and Weiler (1991) have highlighted how privileged students get more space, as also about the range of experiences amongst the marginalised students.

## Peer Relations as a Function of Feminist Pedagogical Work

The majority of students brought out that while there were many discussions and even harsh conflicts around caste, class, language amongst themselves, the course and their teachers did not take account of these. Social location and identity were never explicitly discussed in the classroom and therefore they felt that the classroom was not equally open for all students—some termed it a failure of the feminist principle of "the personal is political" (H.B., July 5, 2017; M.H., July 20, 2017; A.J., August 14, 2017, interviews). These students recognised that they had collectively failed to develop a peer support system but rather had antagonistic relationships based on competition and pressure. One student quite directly stated that it marked the failure of women's studies as a whole that their degree course did not enable them to build solidarities among themselves because there were significant hierarchies and structural problems in the classroom which they were unable to address (H.B., interview, July 5, 2017). Another student argued that women's studies research degrees train in disciplinary standpoints but do not foreground social standpoints (P.M., interview, November 29, 2017). Students thus frame the women's studies degree as holding some pedagogical responsibility for the social hierarchy among students within the classroom.

Teachers shared some of the strategies they have adopted. One found that teaching Linda Alcoff's well-known essay "The Problem of Speaking for Others" (1988) initiated much debate in the classroom and made students "reflect on the operations of the classroom and their politics," therefore bringing to the surface questions of political positions. Despite such efforts, she observed there was an "appropriation of privileged students working on Dalit questions" (T42, interview, August 21, 2017). Another mentioned how she gave students both regional language and English readings so as to enable them to develop peer systems where students can translate for each other (T35, interview, November 24, 2017). In one programme, teachers deliberately assigned diverse groups for students to understand the contradictions of the distance in their social locations. However, they also discussed some instances of social differences among students becoming more charged through group assignments. With reference to diverse classrooms and foregrounding "difference," Weiler notes that,

> [I]n settings in which students come from differing positions of privilege or oppression, the sharing of experience raises conflicts rather than building solidarity. In these circumstances, the collective exploration of experience leads not to a common knowledge and solidarity based on sameness, but to the tensions of an articulation of difference. Such exploration raises again the problems left unaddressed by Freirean pedagogy: the overlapping and multiple forms of oppression revealed in 'reading the world' of experience (Weiler, 1991, p. 469).

Thus, pedagogical strategies that attempt to deploy some mode of peer group work can produce mixed results. In another programme, students shared how such pedagogical interventions were attempted by certain teachers but across different batches have been reported only as "patronising" and counter-productive – "the tendency of [Teacher X]

to assign students to help others is problematic and often created tensions as students accused the 'weaker' students of not putting enough effort and getting frustrated" (C.Y., interview, August 17, 2017). This narrative of "'weaker" students not pulling their weight was common enough in the mandatory group work too that was discussed above—but the critical difference is the pedagogical method deployed. Assigning group projects is different from assigning "better" students to "help" "weaker" students—"remedial" efforts as students labelled these only reproduce the humiliation of students from marginalised caste-class backgrounds. In addition to this, students from marginalised locations talked about how the extra effort they required from even the well-meaning peers and teachers made them feel like they were a "burden" (A.I., November 27, 2017; M.S., August 17, 2017, interviews). Some students believed that such peer group activities are conflict ridden and often break down but they are of value because they open them to a wider understanding of feminism and on a personal level, at least initiate a process of self-reflection which an individual may or may not take further. They reported that it is not the end product but process that is considered important and factored into assessments (H.U., September 7, 2017; U.R., September 7, 2017, interviews). Therefore, as a pedagogical strategy, group assignments and other such exercises do hold potential to impact peer relations and how students understand social location and the axes of privilege and marginalisation that construct their own locations.

There is a recognition by some teachers that pedagogical strategies may or may not work towards privileged students recognising their structural advantages, or marginalised students coming out better off with a sense of how the disadvantages they face are more structural than individual. Often students understand these as epistemic questions but that does not necessarily translate into understanding them in their own social interactions. At best it can create some discomfort about the existing form of peer relations and friendships and how social and institutional interactions in general operate; at worst, students remain unaffected by the process in any real sense. The worst outcome is where the privileged become vociferous about "reverse discrimination" and develop a stronger idea of "merit"—such cases were also reported. In any case, teachers attempting such interventions acknowledged that even if students get some sense of discomfort and understanding through that discomfort, the space of a degree is not enough for some kind of radical transformation. This is echoed by Ellsworth (1989) in her experiences of developing anti-racist feminist pedagogies in her course:

> By the end of the semester, participants in the class agreed that commitment to rational discussion about racism in a classroom setting was not enough to make that setting a safe space for speaking out and talking back. We agreed that a safer space required high levels of trust and personal commitment to individuals in the class, gained in part through social interactions outside of class—potlucks, field trips, participation in rallies and other gatherings. Opportunities to 'know' the motivations, histories, and stakes of individuals in the class should have been planned early in the semester (1989, p. 316).

As important as I think it is for feminist pedagogues to think about "social interactions outside of class," this aspect did not feature in a significant manner in my data—partially because I never asked about this. Thus for the purposes of the discussion here I shall keep the focus on student interactions within the classroom. Even in classrooms where pedagogical interventions in peer relations are undertaken, there are of course disagreements among students as well as discrimination. Yet the exercise of understanding each other's location puts the battles up front rather than pushing them under the table. This in my view is the most critical aspect of feminist pedagogical work. Based on the discussion above, it appears that classrooms where faculty intervention does not exist are much more highly polarised – the sources of such polarisation are obviously not merely the academic content and the classroom dynamics, but rather wider ones such as the nature of student politics, regional and institutional specificities. For instance, marginalised students everywhere reported being quite lost in the early semesters, not being able to follow the lecture or the discussion that English medium students lead, and having nurtured feelings of inferiority due to differences in the cultural capital of the students. What I find noteworthy is that these aspects do not find as much focus in classrooms with pedagogical intervention in peer relations as they do elsewhere and more importantly these do not lead into bitter divisions in the classroom, or a rejection of women's studies teachers or the discipline for failing feminist ethics.

The pedagogical effort to intervene in peer relations does not "resolve" the hierarchies among the socially diverse body of students but I would argue by making these power differences visible and enabling discussions around them, the teachers create a space to validate to some extent the discomfort and pain marginalised students experience in the classroom and provide academic legitimacy to their experience of marginalisation. The beginning point of Ellsworth's discussion of critical pedagogy in the context of the racism at her university is that the course she developed was premised on the existence of racism as an undeniable reality, not something the course would debate. The course was meant to focus on *how* to deal with racism pedagogically, not whether it exists or not. In my view, the promise of feminist pedagogical promises lies in the ability of teachers to institute exercises within degree courses to directly take a position on the power dynamics within a classroom; the impact of such interventions notwithstanding. Within the institutional limits of the university, it is not feasible to expect that degrees can train students in the practice of feminist ethics and produce perfectly feminist students—if at all one can define what that would entail. Certainly the outcomes and impact of feminist pedagogical intervention cannot be determined by the pedagogue. What is clear however is that the overload of the ethical expectations that this article has attempted to bring out necessitates a more direct pedagogical engagement with classroom dynamics.

## Conclusion

The attempt to foreground difference epistemologically at times involves pedagogic techniques that encourage students to reflect on their own social location, and since this occurs in a classroom setting, by extension, it means locating oneself in relation to peers. The pedagogical intent in this case cannot be interpreted as being limited to

the transaction of certain epistemological frameworks. Inadvertently—or rather as an underlying impulse that the feminist teacher does not always want to make explicit—the pedagogical intent of these techniques involves an ethical component. In other words, utilising such techniques of understanding inequality and difference seeks to enable the student to understand and tangibly act upon the inequalities—at least in their immediate setting. Thus in my view, feminist pedagogical techniques are directed at creating feminist classrooms. However these methods are not geared towards actually engaging with peer relations in any direct sense, yet this is the dominant expectation of students from feminist pedagogy

More than the pedagogical strategies in and of themselves, my assertion is that the data brings out the merits of instituting feminist pedagogical practices within the curriculum. It is evident from the discussion above that the outcomes are mixed. The precise practices can provide possible models but these models are context-specific and even in the same programme, teachers reported having to adapt and evolve their pedagogical strategies with different batches of students. Nor can there be any one model that can account for the overflowing expectations of feminist pedagogical ethics in women's studies programmes.

Furthermore, with regard to the emphasis on good pedagogical practices in student narratives, an important pattern that I observed was that such positive accounts of feminist pedagogy acquired centre-stage in the accounts of marginalised students. Privileged students, despite expressing much admiration and awe for these pedagogical practices, were much more focused on the personal impact in *their* lives. In my opinion, such patterns highlight that pedagogical strategies to enable marginalised students need to be combined with equally robust pedagogies to destabilise the privilege of students from socially dominant locations, at least within the classroom. Certainly the strategies such as group assignments take account of and engage with both these aspects but the differential learning outcomes suggest that problematising privilege for the privileged student proves much more difficult—as it is in the social world in general. As discussed above, it remains a concern for some teachers that the women's studies degree holds the possibility of enabling privileged students to acquire languages of marginalisation to enhance their epistemic, social and institutional power. Therefore, as important as it is to develop support systems for marginalised students to overcome their structural disadvantages, unless the privilege of the dominant students is shaken meaningfully, the classroom will not be enabling for the best of marginalised students.

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