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## Women's Studies, Gender Studies, and LGBT/Queer Studies: Defining and Debating the Subject of Academic Knowledge in India

By Virginie Dutoya<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Women's Studies is first introduced in Indian academia in the 1970s. There are now more than 150 centres conducting research on women and gender as well as numerous teaching programmes on these topics in India. Research on sexualities and non-heterosexual identities and practices, while less developed, also emerged in the 1990s. As in any academic field, research on Women's Studies, gender, and sexuality has been marked by epistemic debates, in particular "terminology debates" (i.e., debates about the proper concepts for discussing gender and sexuality in India). Using a corpus of academic texts, course syllabi, and other academic documents as well as 15 interviews with academics involved in Women's Studies, Gender Studies, and/or research on sexuality in India, this article examines two of these terminology debates. The first concerns the use of the term "Gender Studies" rather than "Women's Studies", and the second looks at the relevance of terms such as LGBT and queer to designate non-heterosexual individuals, groups, and practices. In both debates the question of North/South domination and (post)colonialism are central and are also connected to issues of gender, class, and caste domination. Moreover, both debates question the link between academia and feminist/LGBT/queer activism. This article shows that the process of defining the subject of academic knowledge is highly political and embedded in complex power dynamics that are both localized and globalized. It also highlights the epistemic creativity of the knowledge produced in India to discuss women, gender, and non-heterosexuality.

*Keywords:* India, Women's studies, Gender studies, Queer studies, LGBT studies, Academia, Feminism

### Introduction

Unlike the representation of Women's and Gender Studies as a production of the Global North academia, in India, Women's Studies is first introduced in the 1970s and quickly institutionalized. There are now more than 150 centres conducting research on women and gender (University Grants Commission, *Twelfth Plan Guidelines*) and countless publications in this field. Research on sexualities and non-heterosexual identities and practices, while less developed, also emerged in the 1990s and has grown since 2000 (Dutoya, 241). Whether or not these academic fields constitute disciplines remains open to debate, as Women's Studies was initially meant to be included within other academic disciplines. However, there has been a shift towards "disciplinization" since the 1990s, and Indian institutions now offer numerous degrees in Women's Studies and a few in Gender Studies (and even some in both Gender and Women's Studies) (Anand 77). This is less true of Sexuality and LGBT/Queer Studies, which might be mentioned in the syllabi of Women's Studies and Gender Studies programmes but

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have not reached a similar degree of institutionalization. In this article, I will therefore refer to Women's Studies and Gender Studies as "disciplines" and to Sexuality and Queer Studies as "fields of research".

The process of institutionalizing Women's Studies and Gender Studies and the development of research on sexuality (including non-normative sexualities) raises many questions. Several of these questions relate to the proper terminology for discussing gender and sexuality in India. These debates focus on what terms should be used to designate the actual field of studies ("Gender Studies"? "Women's Studies"?) as well as on the designation of the object of these studies. For example, should labels such as "gay", "lesbian", "LGBT", and "queer" be used? What is the difference between those terms? Should researchers instead opt for vernacular categories?

These questions are not specific to India, Global South countries, and the production of gender knowledge. Finding the appropriate terms to designate an object of study is always a challenge, particularly so in the case disciplines like Gender Studies, which has a long history of looking critically at processes of categorization. The apparently simple act of attributing a name to a group is central to representation. Indeed, representation can be defined as a discursive process in which a representative (here, the academic) assigns a name and an identity to a group, which is constituted through representation (Bourdieu, *Délégation et fétichisme*). As Stuart Hall has emphasized, "how things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflexive, after the event, role" (Hall 443). The pioneers of research on women, gender, and sexuality in India were generally aware of their political role. For instance, Nivedita Menon, publisher of the first anthology on sexuality, commented on the importance of terminology, arguing that "political action is precisely the attempt to produce particular forms of self-identification and to hegemonise common sense meanings of language" (Menon 18).

This explains why these debates constitute a good entry point for understanding the dynamics of knowledge production on gender in a country located in the Global South, even more so in the case of a postcolonial country like India. Indeed, in these debates, knowledge production emerges as the site where power is both enforced and contested. Yet in many ways India is not a typical example of "academic dependency" (Alatas 600). This is especially the case for Women's Studies, a discipline that developed fairly early and rapidly and in which India has been recognized as a site of theoretical production (Wöhler 325). Moreover, the influence of postcolonial studies combined with early reflection on the links between knowledge production and colonization (Baber) makes India particularly interesting to examine. The cross-fertilization of postcolonial studies, Women's Studies, and Gender Studies has led to important observations in the context of India (Mohanty; Narayan; Sunder Rajan), particularly with regard to early recognition of the way the "women's question" can be used to strengthen imperial domination (Chaudhuri; Keating). This realization has gained renewed interest in the last 20 years, as the debate surrounding the "NGOization" of the women's movement (Lang 101) and the "globalization" of gender (Alvarez; Bernal and Grewal; Cîrstocea et al.; S. Roy)<sup>2</sup> has once more highlighted the way women and gender can be instrumentalized to reproduce and strengthen both global and local systems of domination (Menon).

The objective of this article is thus to understand the processes by which women, gender, and sexuality are defined as subjects of academic knowledge in India by analysing the debates around terminology. I contend that these debates are a key entry point for understanding the social mechanisms of knowledge production. As Pierre Bourdieu pointed out, concepts travel without their context, and the way they are reinterpreted by local actors

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<sup>2</sup> See the introduction of this special issue for a detailed discussion of these two phenomena.

says a lot about the social field in which they are (re)located (Bourdieu 30). In this regard, I am interested here in the “modes in which concepts are made to work and provide insight, rather than on their ‘purity’ in relation to an ascribed point of origin”, as Mary E. John suggested (John 121). A major finding of this article is that in order to understand the debates about terminology, one must not only pay attention to the connection between the global division of labour in the social sciences (Alatas 606) and the globalization of gender (Cîrstocea et al.; Desai and Rinaldo), but it is also necessary to look at how these processes interact with more localized phenomena, such as the relationship between the women's movement, academia, and the structure and history of the university system in addition to the sociology of those who work in this system. This article does not follow an evolutionary pattern according to which Gender Studies constitutes the “up-to-date” version of Women's Studies and spread from the Global North to the Global South. It shows that the global circulation of these disciplines and their key concepts is not straightforward but instead sinuous, leading to important epistemic and theoretical shifts and innovations.

The second section of this article will present the methodology and corpus underpinning my analysis. I will then return to the emergence of women, gender, and sexuality as legitimate objects of knowledge, or, more concretely, as objects of academic production (be it in terms of publication or teaching). In the fourth and last section, I will show that the debates around terminology cannot be understood in purely academic terms and are also embedded in political and material considerations. They therefore reveal the systems of domination that shape knowledge production while also resisting those systems.

### **Methodology and Corpus**

This article is based on two terminology debates: the first on counter-heteronormative sexualities and identities and the second on the decision to label research on women, sexuality, and gender as “Gender Studies” or “Women's Studies”.

To understand the first debate, I have returned to and expanded upon my initial research on academic discourse about counter-heteronormative<sup>3</sup> sexualities and identifications (Dutoya,). For that purpose, I constituted a corpus of about 50 academic texts (books, chapters, and articles) on non-heterosexual lives, practices, and groups published between 1990 and 2019 (see Table 1). It includes 26 books (collective and single-authored), 22 articles and book chapters, dissertations, and other types of publications. This corpus does not aim to be exhaustive, especially for the 2010s, when the growth in the number of publications in this field makes it difficult to include all of them.<sup>4</sup> For each text, I looked not only at the conceptual and terminological choices made for discussing gender and sexuality, but also at the references the authors employed as well as the location of the author and the editor in order to understand the location of these texts within circuits of knowledge production (Collyer 58).

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<sup>3</sup> The expression “counter-heteronormative” is taken from Nivedita Menon (“Outing Heteronormativity” 3), who defined it as follows: “The term ‘counter-heteronormative’ is used to refer to a range of political assertions that implicitly or explicitly challenge heteronormativity and the institution of monogamous patriarchal marriage”.

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as the first draft of this paper was written in 2019, not all publications from that year could be considered for inclusion.

**Table 1: Disciplines of the Texts in the Corpus**

| Discipline           | 1995-1999 | 2000-2009 | 2010-2019 | Total |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| Anthropology         | 3         | 2         | 1         | 6     |
| Cultural Studies     | 1         | 5         | 2         | 8     |
| Gender/Queer Studies |           | 10        | 6         | 16    |
| Literature           | 1         | 4         | 3         | 8     |
| Political Science    |           |           | 2         | 2     |
| Sociology            |           | 3         | 4         | 7     |
| Other                | 1         | 1         | 2         | 4     |
| Total                | 6         | 25        | 20        | 51    |

Since Women's Studies and Gender Studies were developed before research on sexuality and quickly expanded, it was not possible to form a similar corpus for analysing the debates on the proper disciplinary name and boundaries. While I have primarily relied on scientific publications to understand this discussion, conferences reports and programmes as well as degree syllabi and course outlines constituted other important sources. I collected these documents through the Centre for Women's Development Studies' (CWDS) library in Delhi, my contacts (especially for older courses and syllabi), and directly from colleges and university websites in the case of ongoing programmes.

To gain a better understanding of the two debates between 2014 and early 2020, I conducted 15 interviews with scholars and academics (from PhD students to retired professors) working on gender, sexuality, and women or located in Women's Studies or Gender Studies centres and departments, mainly in New Delhi and its region. In some cases (about a third), I met the same people several times, both formally and informally. These interviews were semi-structured in the case of the formal encounters and aimed at gaining a better understanding of the material constraints of knowledge production, local power dynamics, and the sociology of those working on gender, women, and sexuality. Looking at these different sources, I was particularly interested in how the concept of "gender" was used and how Gender Studies and Women's Studies were defined. Of course, many other concepts were under debate, beginning with the concept of "women" and "feminism". As I could not do justice to the complexity of these debates, a topic that has already been tackled by others (John), I have chosen to focus on the concept of gender to reconstitute the debate about terminology and discuss its political and scientific significance.

My decision to focus on New Delhi and its region for the interviews was mainly practical, this being the region I knew best after conducting research on the women's movement there for more than 10 years (Dutoya). This constitutes a bias in the sense that many prestigious universities are situated in this area, and it in many ways dominates other regions of India (though there are prestigious universities outside of Delhi). As the work of Nithila Kanagasabai in Tamil Nadu has shown, the issues at stake are quite different in smaller institutions and to such an extent that she considers Women's Studies centres in these institutions as "alternate centres of knowledge production and circulation" (Kanagasabai 709).

In this regard, this article itself reflects the power dynamics at stake in processes of knowledge formation on gender, both within India and at a global level. While working on this project I was also aware of my own position as a white European researcher and queer feminist. This position has an impact on the way I conducted this research and framed my research question. In particular, my initial surprise regarding the importance of “Women’s Studies” in India stems from the fact that, in France, Women’s Studies has nearly disappeared while Gender Studies has become much more popular, albeit still contested. However, this article does not aim to understand why what happened in France, and to a larger extent in most countries of the Global North (Boxer; Schwartz), did not happen in India, as such a question is pointless. I rapidly moved away from a teleological and evolutionary framework, according to which Gender Studies is the natural evolution of Women’s Studies. I instead decided to analyse the discussion around those terminologies, specifically in a decade (the 2010s) when several programmes and centres for Gender Studies or Women and Gender Studies were implemented in universities based in New Delhi. The relevance of this question in India was validated by the fact that I was able to find evidence that such a debate existed and that many of the colleagues I met were ready to discuss this issue at length. While I would not argue that not having been part of a field makes one unfit to study it, I should mention that I occupied a particular position as an outsider with strong ties to Indian academia within a context in which most of the history of Women’s Studies in India has been made by those who participated in it (Anand 17). For the people I met, I was a colleague and sometimes a fellow activist, which opened many doors. Many of them were women, most defined themselves as feminists, and some identified as queer. This created a sense of familiarity between us and probably gave me access to more information. However, my informants and I were also deeply aware of the fact that my work shares in a long tradition of producing academic discourse on women and sexual subalterns in the Global South, a discourse that might in one way or another contribute to the domination of these people (Abu-Lughod 784-785). Yet, as I will try to show in this article, this discomfort can also be productive, as it engages the researcher in reflexive analysis of her work and renders the fiction of universal and non-situated knowledge impossible.

### **The Emergence of Women, Gender, and Sexuality as Legitimate Objects of Knowledge**

In the 1970s, women emerged as legitimate objects of knowledge in different areas of Indian academia. While this emergence was largely initiated by central institutions and was initially uncoordinated and localized, it garnered support from feminist researchers, who not only started conducting research on and teaching about women but also tried to impose and defend this new object in the 1980s.

#### *The Rapid Institutionalization of Women’s Studies*

Much has been written on the history and origins of Women’s Studies in India (Bhagwat and Rege; John, “Country Paper - India”; Pappu; Phadke). I will simply highlight the main points here, relying on Arpita Anand’s (2014) detailed work on this subject. Most sources point to the dual origin of Women’s Studies. Chronologically, it is first necessary to mention thinking initiated in the early 1970s at Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women’s (SNDT) University, a women’s university in Bombay. In 1973, this university set up the Research Unit for Women’s Studies (RUWS) in its sociology department, which later became the RCWS (Research Centre for Women’s Studies). For this women’s university, founded in 1916, it marked a paradigm shift from educating women to making them the subject of study.

A second key moment was the Indian government’s appointment of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) as part of preparations for the International Conference on Women, held in Mexico City in 1975. The publication of the Committee’s report came as a shock for many feminists, as it indicated that the situation of women in India had in many

respects apparently deteriorated since independence (Committee on the Status of Women in India). Several academics involved with this Committee in various ways played a role in the development of Women's Studies in India. In particular, Neera Desai was the first director of RUWS, and Vina Mazumdar was among the founders of the first major non-university centre for Women's Studies.

The Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), a public body responsible for overseeing research in the social sciences in India, contributed to the making of the report by providing material and human support (Mazumdar 65–82). In 1975, the ICSSR took up the issue of research on women and funded an early research programme on the subject during a period of repression, when Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, declared a state of emergency in 1975 (Pappu 224). The ICSSR's first programme on Women's Studies aimed to identify the need for change in public policy and convince the research community to review the methodology, concepts, theories, and analytical apparatus of the social sciences to understand why women were excluded (Mazumdar 50). The women involved in this programme ended up founding the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) in 1980, again with the support of the ICSSR. The first National Women's Conference was held the following year, and it was there that the Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS) was created.

In the 1980s, Women's Studies became more significant in universities. In 1986, the UGC, the public body responsible for overseeing and funding universities, launched a major Women's Studies programme. The aim was to establish research centres and "cells" devoted to women in universities by focusing on three objectives: research, teaching, and expansion (i.e., activities aimed at "local communities," such as development projects, raising awareness, etcetera) (University Grants Commission, *Guidelines for the Development of Women's Studies in Indian Universities and Colleges*). This grew from five in the mid-1980s to about 50 known centres in the early 1990s (not all supported by UGC). In 2007, 67 centres for Women's Studies were supported by UGC (University Grants Commission, *Guidelines for the Development of Women's Studies 2007*) and 159 in 2012 (University Grants Commission, *Twelfth Plan Guidelines*). Initially, the teaching component was minimal in these Women's Studies cells, particularly because from the outset the main promoters of Women's Studies refused to consider them as a discipline in the strict sense of the term (Anand 41). However, in the 1990s and 2000s, various courses, diplomas, and degrees in Women's Studies were created, followed later by a few in Gender Studies.

### *The Trajectory of "Gender" in Indian Academia*

The term "gender" has been used in Women's Studies texts from the mid-1980s onwards. For example, in 1984, the topic of the second national conference on Women's Studies was "gender justice". There one of the participants presented a paper entitled "A Critique of the Sex-Gender System". However, according to my respondents, who had difficulty pinpointing when it first appeared, the term was not widely used in the Indian social sciences until the early 1990s and did not face much resistance.

In many cases though, "gender" was and still is used as a mere proxy for "women", and many texts proposing a gendered analysis in fact only look at the position of women. In these cases, the term "gender" is often not defined and typically used in the title or in a common expression ("gender violence", "gender discrimination", etcetera). However, many authors use gender more extensively. One key text, often quoted in Women's Studies curricula, is a booklet from 2000 entitled *Understanding Gender* by Kamla Bhasin, a leading figure of the women's movement in Delhi (associated with two important organizations) and an independent researcher. In it, Bhasin defines gender as the social construction of the masculine and the feminine, saying:



Gender refers to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman, the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles. It is used as an analytical tool to understand social realities with regard to women and men. (Bhasin 1–2)

While quite a classic definition, it tends to set aside the use of gender as proposed by Joan Scott, which employs gender as a category of critical analysis to understand the joint construction of difference and power (Scott 1067-1068). This approach to gender was also used by Indian researchers working on women and gender. For example, in the field of history from the 1990s onwards, many researchers sought not only to “find women” in Indian history, but also to understand how representations of the feminine and masculine had structured colonial discourse and practices as well as nationalist responses (A. Roy; Sarkar). Various authors have been quick to highlight how the concept of gender can be used as a critical tool for deconstructing relationships of domination. In particular, the concept of gender has been used to explore the intersectionality of class, caste, and gender (Banerjee and Ghosh; Rao; Tharu and Niranjana). The 1990s (more specifically, the second half of the decade) was also a period during which studies on sexualities and particularly counter-heteronormative identifications and practices developed in India. This is not to say that counter-heteronormative sexualities and gender identifications suddenly appeared in the Indian academic field in 1995. Rather, there were few publications on this subject before that date (Dutoya, 243<sup>5</sup>). According to the editor of one of the first anthologies on the topic, scholarship on sexuality initially focused on sexual violence, “but increasingly recast [it] as desire going beyond the bounds of heteronormativity” (Menon, =xiii).

Importantly, research on sexualities in India was not necessarily developed there. Only a quarter of the authors on my corpus on counter-heteronormative sexualities were working in an Indian institution. About 60% were in the United States or Europe. Almost all of them, however, were of Indian origin, and most started their higher education in India. So, research on sexuality, particularly counter-heteronormative, was first developed outside India, and those who conducted these projects had to cater to the demands of non-Indian academic systems, where they made their careers. However, this evolved over time. Between 1995 and 2004, about a third of the corpus was “Indian” from a publishing standpoint; from 2005 onwards, the number grew to 58%. Sexuality, LGBT, and queer issues gained dedicated spaces, like the “sexualities series” edited by Yoda Press under the direction of activist and researcher Gautam Bhan. These issues were also better represented in publications dedicated to Women's Studies, such as the feminist publisher for women Kali, founded in 1984 (which led to two distinctive publishing houses in 2003: Women Unlimited and Zubaan). This development was consistent with the growing interest of Indian academics in issues surrounding sexuality. Many of the degrees offered in Women's Studies centres (now Women's Studies departments) include papers on sexuality. Moreover, on campuses, students have developed LGBT/Queer associations and Gender Studies groups to discuss and mobilize around issues of gender and sexuality.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, the concept of gender is used in many disciplines in the social sciences, from sociology to history. Similarly, research on sexuality has assumed many disciplinary forms. However, gender and sexuality studies have not emerged in India, and only Women's Studies are really recognized by institutions. For instance, of the brochures of 22 master's degrees (in

<sup>5</sup> I followed the activities of the Gender Studies Group of Delhi University in spring 2015. A pioneer student association is Anjuman, a queer collective created by JNU students in 2003. [http://anjuman\\_jnu.blogspot.fr/](http://anjuman_jnu.blogspot.fr/)

the sciences and philosophy) I collected focusing on gender and Women's Studies across the country in the 2010s (in 19 institutions), 15 of them were awarded in "Women's Studies," 3 in "Gender Studies", and 4 in "Women's and Gender Studies".

The preference for the term "Women's Studies" in India might be connected to the way women's issues and later sexuality issues, particularly under the label "gender issues", have been framed outside of the women's and feminist movements in the past few decades. Indeed, as scholarship on gender, LGBT, and queer issues has expanded, these issues have also become politically, socially, and culturally visible. In particular, the concept of gender spread to many other arenas in the 1990s, from government to activist discourse. Commenting on this phenomenon, feminist and university professor Nivedita Menon argued that gender had two journeys in India: "One journey is towards the dissolving of gender identity and the category of 'woman' as such and the other towards the congealing of the term and its stabilization within development discourses" (Menon 95).

If Menon considers the first trajectory to be positive, she worries about the second, using the common trope of the de-politicization of gender as it circulates (Cîrstocea 183). Because the concept of gender is now used by a wide variety of actors with different agendas and in different contexts, it can be considered an "essentially contested concept" (Gallie 167). This means that in order to understand the way gender is used and defined in an academic context and, more broadly, the way gender and sexuality are discussed in academic arenas, one needs to understand its political dimension.

### **From Politics to Academia and Back: The Process of Subject Definition**

#### *Defining a Discipline: Gender or Women's Studies?*

The fact that Women's Studies was developed from the top down, particularly in universities, might be one of the reasons why the term "Women's Studies" has remained an administrative category regardless of the concepts that might or might not be used. The institutional preference for using the term "Women's Studies" does not preclude the use of the concept of gender, be it within Women's Studies centres, teaching programmes or elsewhere. In this section I will focus on where to situate research, a course or oneself within Gender and/or Women's Studies as disciplinary fields.

The political dimension of Women's Studies, Feminist Studies and Gender Studies—and, later, LGBT and Queer studies—is well known. These academic disciplines or fields of study were initiated by feminist, LGBT, and queer activists, and much has been written on the complex and intense relationship between activism and academic research (Brown; Dutoya, "Defining the 'Queers'"; Lewin and Leap). In India, the relationship between the women's movement and Women's Studies is somewhat paradoxical, as many of my respondents pointed out that unlike what had happened in other countries, and in particular in the United States, Women's Studies was born not out of the movement, but was imposed by the central administration. However, at the same time, most of the texts that discuss the origins of Women's Studies in India (Bhagwat and Rege; Bhattacharya; Phadke; Sreerekha) insist on the fact that the project was also supported by feminists, and the term "Women's Studies movement" is often used to describe this field of research, be it in the literature (Anand 161/) or in the discussions I had with researchers based in India.

For a long time, it seems that the choice to use the term "Women's Studies" (rather than "Feminist Studies" or "Gender Studies", for instance) was little discussed. The expressions "Women's Studies" and "Gender Studies" were sometimes used interchangeably, particularly in course titles as well as in publications. For example, in a 1997 article, Sharmila Rege discussed the links between sociology and, according to the title of the article, Gender Studies in an Indian context. Throughout the article, she used "Gender Studies" and "Women's Studies" interchangeably, the latter term appearing much more often (22 times in the body of

the text as opposed to just 5 times for “Gender Studies”). Rege was a major feminist figure and an academic who played an important role in the development of Women's Studies. In the 1990s, she headed the Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre at the University of Pune. She undoubtedly knew about the debates on the concept of gender and the different approaches to the terms “Gender Studies” and “Women's Studies”. This interchangeability is therefore even more striking, and one could question whether her choice reflects a real semantic difference.

The first reason for this interchangeability could be that, as Mary E. John in her “Feminist vocabularies” argued, the very concept of women in India was already defined as social during the colonial period, not in terms of biology and nature as it was in Europe (125). This definition of women as an essentially social group might have contributed to blurring the difference between Women's Studies and Gender Studies.

Maitrayee Chaudhuri, sociology professor at JNU, has suggested that the use of the term “Women's Studies” was largely due to the administrative inertia of the UGC, which was dominated by state bureaucrats and had not updated its terminology since the 1980s. This is confirmed by the fact that Gender Studies was mostly implemented in centres or departments not supported by UGC, as was the case at Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) for example. From this perspective, studies on women more or less became Gender Studies, but the official terminology took more time to evolve. Some of the academics I met while conducting my research agreed with this evolutionary perspective. For instance, Anu Aneja, then Director of the School of Gender and Development Studies at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), reflected on the discussion surrounding the publication of a handbook on Women's Studies and Gender Studies. According to her, it was mostly a generational issue, as “some of the feminists who are part of the first generation, closer to activists, were against the gender terminology. Some of the younger ones, prefer the more inclusive term. Eventually, we kept ‘Women's Studies and Gender Studies in India’ for the book”. (Anu Aneja, interview, 01/11/2017).

Such a vision of the debate might reflect the fact that Aneja began her career in the United States and was influenced by the terms of the debate there. Others insisted on the different disciplinary perspectives offered by Women's Studies and Gender Studies, as it was done by Shubhra Nagalia, assistant professor at AUD, the first university in Delhi to offer a master's degree in Gender Studies. During our first discussion in 2015, she discussed the difference between Gender Studies and Women's Studies:

You see you'll have difficulties finding material on the post-80s period, because there has not been deliberation and debate on the questions of gender/women's studies, and the choice between the two. As the terms come with a packaging for international area, the self-description is very difficult. We are trying to write it down, we in this programme, why are we more advanced with ‘women’ or ‘gender’. I don't think that gender is a more extended term, to me it is more a question of how you set the problematic, it brings different interactions with the question of the linguistic turn and cultural studies. In the context of the emergence of new disciplines, women's studies tends to be defensive, to protect its grounds, so it becomes a bigger challenge to define what women's studies means. (Shubhra Nagalia, interview 17/03/2015)

According to Nagalia, the difference between Gender Studies and Women's Studies cannot be reduced to an evolutionary pattern, according to which Gender Studies is the updated version of Women's Studies. In her view, Gender Studies above all offers another take on issues pertaining to Women's Studies, in particular by including perspectives from Queer Studies and

Cultural Studies. She also advocated for cooperation between Women's Studies and Gender Studies. Indeed, the launch of the Gender Studies programme at AUD benefited greatly from the support and inspiration drawn from the pillars of Women's Studies, among whom she cited Uma Chakrabarty, Mary E. John, and Indu Agnihotri of the CWDS and Illina Sen<sup>6</sup>. The advantage of Gender Studies is that it offers greater freedom to include authors who, while not part of the disciplinary field of Women's Studies, can nevertheless contribute to the debate.

The association between Women's Studies and Gender Studies is reflected in the double degrees (MPhil and PhD) offered at the CWDS and Ambedkar University<sup>7</sup>, which Shubhra Nagalia presented as follows:

We call it women and gender studies, because we didn't want to let go of gender studies. And we didn't want to let go of women's studies either. So, in that sense that title speaks more of what the route is... But I personally feel that I would want on the agenda of our programme to initiate that dialogue. (Nagalia, interview, 17/03/2015)

These comments suggest that the persistence of Women's Studies in India must be taken seriously and not considered merely as a delayed transition towards Gender Studies. Indeed, the choice to employ one term instead of another is linked to academic decisions. In the case of AUD, Shubhra Nagalia explained in a 2018 article that the choice to develop and, to a certain extent, market Gender Studies was connected to the history of the university and the context in which it was created. Indeed, despite being a public university,<sup>8</sup> AUD was created in 2007 "with a mandate to implement several neo-liberal policy imperatives to create what is called 'quality cutting edge' education which as a sector can compete internationally and attract foreign students from all over the world" (Nagalia 81). In this regard, the development of Gender Studies was a way to signal a form of modernity and international academic standards. This choice must therefore be viewed as part of the complex ways in which the concept of gender in India has been used, as I outlined earlier. Similarly, discussion surrounding the proper terminology for talking about sexuality and non-heterosexuality reveal the relationship between activism, NGO work, and academia and the more personal process of subject formation.

*"Having a Language for That": Debating the Use of the Acronym "LGBT"*<sup>9</sup>

Many terms can be and have been used to designate non-heterosexuals in academic texts dealing with gender and sexuality in India, such as "gays", "hijras", "kothis",<sup>10</sup> "lesbians", "queers", and "same-sex lovers". The search for words that might "describe what we are" is a

<sup>6</sup> As in the case of the Women's and Gender Studies programme developed in IGNOU (Anu Aneja, interview, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> This dual degree programme ended in 2019.

<sup>8</sup> The Indian university system is complex, comprised of about 800 universities and 40,000 colleges. Out of the 800, most universities are administered by the States (400), and a few (less than 50) are Central Universities maintained by the Union Government. About 350 universities are private (Ministry of Human Resources). Private universities have developed quickly over the last 30 years as part of the economic liberalization of the 1990s and in response to the increasing number of students.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Vanita, *On Project Bolo*. The objective of this project was to constitute a "collection of oral histories of Indian LGBT persons" through filmed interviews. It included many scholars. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160304001535/http://www.projectbolo.com/#sthash.Kgt29N3o.dpuf>, accessed 27/11/2019). Vanita's interview can be watched on Vimeo (<https://player.vimeo.com/video/26201840>, accessed 27/11/2019). Discussing her first crush on a girl, she comments, "I had no language for that" (4'10). She is not the only one to express such a lack of words.

<sup>10</sup> "Kothis" can designate the so-called passive role in a homosexual anal relationship, or, as an identity, people biologically born as men who behave and refer to themselves as women.

recurring issue in LGBT and queer narratives, including academic ones. Many refer to the moment when they found words that made their sexuality, desires, and feelings “speakable” – or, as Ruth Vanita put it, having a “language for that.”

In that respect, Foucault's work on the emergence of sexual identities in Europe is often quoted and discussed in texts dealing with counter-heteronormative sexualities in India (Gopinath 60; Srivastava 4; Vanita and Kidwai xx). Most authors initially agree with Foucault that sexualities and gender representations need to be de-naturalized and seen as historically constituted. However, many go on to offer a critique of Foucault, questioning his relevance in an Indian context because he failed to consider that sexual categories were also constituted within an East/West framework. While the adequacy of “Western terminology” for describing the Indian social world is a major area of contention, other issues emerge, notably the desirability of all-inclusive terms and the need for intersectional terminology.

An interesting starting point for analyzing these debates is a quote from the movie *Fire*, which has been discussed at length (Ghosh 102; Gopinath 142; Vanita 61). Set in India, produced in Canada, and directed by Canadian-Indian director Deepa Mehta, the movie was released in India in 1998. It depicts the sexual and romantic relationship of Radha and Sita, two women married to two brothers and living in a joint family, thus placing the narrative in a “traditional” middle-class Indian Hindu setting. At one point in the movie, Sita tells her sister-in-law/lover: “There's no word in our language for what we are, how we feel for each other”. As the language used in the movie is English, this statement is rather odd. Vanita points out that it disqualifies English as “our language” (the one actually spoken by the characters) while creating “our language” as all Indian vernacular languages in which a word (supposedly for same-sex love and sex) does not exist. Yet, one can find several words in Indian languages to designate two women having sex with one another, their feelings, or desires. This leads to a double interrogation that Vanita unfolds in several of her publications. First, how to describe, as a historian, same-sex relations that happened before terms such as “lesbian” or “homosexual” existed? Second, is it imperialist to use such terminology to discuss India, past or present (Vanita 61-65)? According to Vanita, while it is important to uncover older categorizations and terms, “homosexuality” is no more imperialist or anachronistic than “family” and no Indian sociologist working on family and writing in English would think about substituting “family” by a word in an Indian language (65).

But the debate was never set up purely in terms of “foreign” versus “local” concepts. Indeed, few scholars would argue that by rule, foreign concepts are of no use in India. In reality, the issue is twofold. First, does the language of sexual identities make sense in India? Second, whose language do we speak in terms of class, caste, and regional or religious identities? In the early twenty-first century, Shivananda Khan, founder of Naz Foundation (a London based NGO working on HIV/AIDS issues in India), argued for the use of “MSM” (men having sex with men) instead of terms like “gay” or “LGBT”. He justified his position by the fact that most Indian men having sex with other men do not think of these practices in terms of identity. According to Khan “lesbian and gay identities” are restricted to limited audiences in terms of class and locality, those who act as “instigators of a queer India,” which is akin to “sexual neo-colonialism” (105). However, as it has been noted in other contexts, MSM is also an internationally recognized category and therefore not that different from LGBT (Seckinelgin 104). But as Khan's text shows, issues of imperialism not only play out on the South/North opposition, but also within India, as some terms are said to make sense only to a small segment of the population, generally upper-middle class (often upper-caste Hindu), English-medium educated and urban. About ten years later, Ashley Tellis, who did his PhD in English literature, formulated a similar critique, arguing that “LGBT rights” were now part of a “globalspeak” and thus embedded in neoliberal politics. According to Tellis (60):

In simply taking the language of “LGBT” and “Queer” and applying it undifferentiated to groups in India without bothering to learn how they understand themselves and in what languages they speak, activists and academics become willing victims in a neocolonial speaking in the coloniser’s language.

For him, the main issue is not that the term is foreign, but that “identity categories” are imposed on those who do not want to fit into them. Tellis’s and Khan’s criticisms, however, differ on one point. According to Khan, the main problem with the “identity framework” is that it renders HIV/AIDS prevention (an issue to which he is particularly sensitive as the founder of Naz Foundation) ineffective. While Tellis acknowledges this issue, he argues that the development of the “LGBT globalspeak” is a result of the development of NGOs in India, particularly those working on HIV/AIDS, who have adopted the terminology of their donors (Tellis, 154-59). It is interesting to note that for Tellis, the term “queer” raises the same issues as LGBT, whereas for others, it has been presented as an epistemological advancement.

### *Queer as the New Horizon?*

The term “queer” was first used in the early 2000s as an “umbrella term” encompassing all “sexual minorities.” It was also used as a verb to signify the process by which alternative (queer) readings of social phenomena, the law, and cultural objects are produced. Interestingly, in several publications, there is a back-and-forth between both uses. For instance, in 2004, Arvind Narrain (2) used queer as both an umbrella term encompassing “the complexity, variety and diversity of identities” operating “outside the heterosexual matrix” and as a term questioning the heterosexual norm.

This concept is also contested. Paola Bacchetta stressed that “queer” is a foreign term forged outside India and belonging to another history. However, she noted that though there were many attempts to construct and propose Indian terms (in vernacular languages), none of them were successful. She used “queer” for lack of a better term (Bacchetta 123). For Tellis, the term “queer” has no critical or disruptive capacities in India, as it was taken over by NGOs and used as a proxy to cover a “laundry list of identities” (gay, lesbian, hijra, etcetera) (Tellis 149). According to him, the uncritical use of queer, disconnected from the social and historical contexts in which it was forged, is a way to dress with theoretical sophistication a lack of real engagement with the lives and struggles of those with non-normative sexualities, from hijras to sex workers.

In spite of these criticisms, “queer” became the term of choice for many scholars dealing with non-heterosexuals as well as for activists.<sup>11</sup> The term is lauded for its fluidity and its politically disruptive potential, explained by Nivedita Menon (39) as follows:

At best, society’s response to the question of sexuality has been in the form of “respecting choice” [...] – that is “most of us are heterosexual, but there are others out there who are *either* lesbian *or* gay, *or* B, T, or K”. The alphabet proliferates endlessly *outside* the unchallenged heterosexual space. But if we recognize that this “normal” heterosexuality is painfully constructed and kept in place [...], precisely in order to sustain existing hierarchies of class and caste and gender, then we would have to accept that all of us are – or have the potential to be – “queer”

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, the Kolkata based lesbian group Sappho for equality regularly organizes a “National Queer Conference” uniting activists and researchers. There is queer pride generally organized at the Autumn in Delhi.

This quote shows that it is not only an academic discussion about concepts, but also a dispute over ethical and political positions, as the act of naming and labelling groups and practices for academic purposes is a form of power.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have shown that, despite the seemingly rapid institutionalization of Women's Studies in India, many questions regarding the subject of this discipline and its relation to Gender Studies remain open. These discussions about the adequate terminology for discussing gender and sexuality in India are not merely debates about the proper vocabulary to employ. When academics discuss whether they are working on gender or Women's Studies or whether they should talk about gays, queers or MSM, they are also discussing where they position themselves as Indian academics and sometimes even as activists.

A major finding of this article is that the debates about terminology cannot be reduced to issues of translation from one (dominating) academic sphere to a (dominated) one. These debates are concerned not only with the global division of intellectual labour and the globalization of gender, but also with local dynamics of power. Those who produce knowledge on gender in and on India cannot be reduced to the position of subaltern scholar (within a global system of knowledge production) or dominant intellectual (in an Indian context).

Moreover, to justify their conceptual and epistemic choices, researchers employ a wide variety of arguments that indicate the various constraints shaping the production of gender knowledge in India. Due to the organization of the academic system in India, social sciences (disciplines such as Women's Studies) do not get major funding and therefore need to adopt strategies that will allow them to exist within universities beyond mere lip service. Additional gender knowledge has a specific location and can be defined alternatively as academic, political, or development oriented. The discourses in these various spheres are interconnected and condition one another. However, while they reveal constraints and difficulties, these debates also maintain a high degree of reflexivity within Women's Studies, Gender Studies, and Sexuality Studies in India, fostering both epistemic and methodological creativity. To expand upon this research, it would be important to examine how this knowledge is transmitted, particularly in the classroom and in a wider variety of universities and colleges, to understand how logics of power play out and are contested at this level.

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