

Contemporary Pioneering Women: Vina Mazumdar

Personal Details

Role	Name	Affiliation
Principal Investigator	Prof. Sumita Parmar	Allahabad University Allahabad
Paper Coordinator	Mr. Sabu George and Dr. Kumudini Pati	CWDS, New Delhi Independent Researcher Associated with the Centre for Women's Studies Allahabad University
Content Writer	Dr. Ruchika Varma	Centre for Women's Studies University of Allahabad
Language Editor	Prof. Sumita Parmar	University of Allahabad

Description of module

Name of the Subject	Women Studies
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Module Name	Contemporary Pioneering Women: Vina Mazumdar
Module ID	PAPER-15 MODULE-15
Prerequisites	The Reader is expected to be familiar with the history of Women's Movement in India and the participation of women in Nationalist Movement.

Objectives	To make the readers understand the critical role of Vina Mazumdaar in evaluating the women’s question in post Independent India. The present module covers her contributions in the fields of Academics, women’s movement and institutional contributions.
Key Words	Women’s movement, report, Institutions. Women’s Studies

Contemporary Pioneering Women: Vina Mazumdaar

Introduction

This Unit is devoted to a few select outstanding women who have by their contributions not only helped society at large , but specially women. They come from diverse fields- Academics, Politics, Social Activism, Entrepreneurship and Art- but through their personal courage, perseverance and sheer grit, they serve as role models, and as sources of inspiration

Vina Mazumdar (1927-2013)

The birth of the discipline of Women’s Studies is an outcome of efforts by women and men who not only worked as social activists and reformers but also tried to change the mindsets of people by educating them. In India, the credit for establishing Women’s Studies as an independent discipline in Indian Universities, Colleges and Institutions goes to many special and dedicated people. The present module is on one such extraordinary person, Vina Majumdar. Popularly known as “Vinadi”, she was also known by various other titles such as ‘a woman activist’, ‘a feminist’, ‘a trouble maker’, and a ‘gender specialist’, but the title she liked most was ‘recorder and chronicler of the Indian women’s Movement’ and the ‘grandmother of Women’s Studies in South Asia’. About her, Prof Vibhuti Patel of the SNTD University of Mumbai wrote, “She could galvanize students, teachers, researchers, women’s organizations, trade unionists, bureaucrats, politicians and law makers into action as she was one of the best ‘argumentative Indians’ produced by ‘women’s studies movement’. She was very good at coining catchy terms such as ‘women’s studies movement’” The passion, integrity and commitment with which she worked on the establishment of Women’s Studies as a subject is both exemplary and inspiring. The present text is a brief account of her life and achievements.

- A brief biographical sketch.

- Post Independence account of women's status in India.
- Development of *Towards equality* Report, 1974.
- Institutional Contributions- IAWS and CWDS, Delhi.
- Major contributions in Academics.

A Biographical Sketch

Born in the year 1927 in a middle class family of Bengal, Vina Majumdar was the youngest of five children in her family. She had three elder brothers and one elder sister. Fondly called *Khuku* at home, the youngest child in the family, she inherited her love for books from her mother. Her father Prakash Majumdar was an engineer. *Nagen*, the family driver was her early tutor and used to teach her letters and numbers. Married at the age of 11 years, her mother, though a gentle person, firmly opposed those who tried to push back the girls in the family within the four walls of the house and was a strong motivational force for her daughters to pursue their studies. Vinaji entered school in 1935 at the age of 8 years. She did her schooling from St. John's Diocesan Girls' Higher Secondary School, Kolkata, then studied at Women's College, Banaras Hindu University, and subsequently at Asutosh College, the University of Calcutta, where she became the secretary of the Ashutosh College Girls Students Union. While at college, she organized a meeting in support of the Rama Rao Committee which recommended expansion of the inheritance rights for daughters through the crucial Hindu Law Reform. In 1947, just after Independence, she went to St Hugh's College, Oxford, where she completed her graduation in 1951. She returned to Oxford University in 1960 and received her D.Phil. there in 1962¹.

In 1952, Vinaji married Shankar Mazumdar whom she met in Patna through her newly developed interest in classical music. Shankar was rebellious by nature and did not bother about social norms. Although earlier their marriage was perceived as an 'unequal marriage', but later all family members were convinced with the decision of Vinaji.

She began her academic career as a lecturer of Political Science in Patna University in 1951, soon becoming the first Secretary of the Patna University Teachers' Association². Later, she taught at Berhampur University. Subsequently, she joined the University Grants Commission Secretariat, New Delhi as an Education Officer and became a Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, for the research project, 'University Education and Social Change in India' (April 1970 – Dec. 1970)³.

She was Member Secretary for the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1971–74). The Committee, appointed by the Government of India in 1971, was reconstituted in 1973 with her, a late entrant, as Member Secretary⁴. The report of the Committee, *Towards Equality*, highlighted the rise in poverty amongst women in the transition from agrarian to industrial society, their deteriorating condition in the country as also the decline of the sex ratio in India. Eventually, the report became a turning point both for Women's Studies and the women's movement in India^{5,6}.

Later she became Director, Programme of Women's Studies, Indian Council of Social Science Research from 1975 to 80⁷. She helped organize a meeting to support the recommendations of the Rama Rao Committee on Hindu Law Reform (to expand the inheritance rights of daughters)⁸.

In 1980, she co-founded the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), New Delhi and remained its founder-Director from 1980 till her retirement in 1991. CWDS initiated the concept of "action-research" as it organized landless peasant women in Bankura district of West Bengal.^[4] It soon became an influential institution which impacted the course of Women's Studies in India.^[7] Throughout her career, she created a confluence of scholarship and activism in Women's Studies, which she referred to as the "Women's Studies Movement"⁹. She was also a founding-member of the Indian Association of Women's Studies (IAWS, founded 1982). Thereafter she was Senior Fellow at CWDS and JP Naik National Fellow, ICSSR for two years. From 1996 to 2005 she was the Chairperson, Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi. Vinaji's elder sister Vani, named her 'a rolling stone' because she changed seven jobs in 14 years !

Post Independence Account of Women's Status in India-

A major contribution of Vina Majumdar was through some of her pioneer academic writings, through which she brought to the forefront, for the first time, the analysis and evaluation of women's participation in the Nationalist Movement. One such excellent work was done by Vinaji along with Leela Kasturi in her paper *Women and Indian Nationalism*¹⁰. Emphasizing the political role of women both the authors pointed out that the major works on the nationalist movement fail to examine the significance or contribution of women's participation in the struggles. This aspect has since then received some attention in the histories of India both before and after 1975 when the need to study women's role in history began to be acknowledged worldwide. An in-depth analysis of women's participation in the movement was taken up in this article which raised issues like-

- Whether women's participation was fairly acknowledged in historical artifacts?
- Whether women's movement from the domestic to public sphere was noticed by their male counterparts and was any 'relief' given to them in their traditional household roles?
- Why were the contributions of males overemphasized and those of women and children underemphasized?
- Did women's participation facilitate women's movement?

In her paper *An Unfulfilled or a Blurred Vision*¹¹? *Jawaharlal Nehru and Indian Women* published in 1998, she critiqued the intentions of Nehru in dealing with the women's question in India. She wrote, "It is the contention of this paper that these qualities of Jawaharlal Nehru's mind were never extended to understand the complexities of the women's question, even though

he was fully aware of the barriers to building a democratic and egalitarian society on the foundations that he had inherited. He perceived these as (a) the ‘Daedalian social and cultural structure’ with divisive religious, linguistic, regional, caste and tribal allegiances; (b) the hierarchy of Indian society, which posed an even greater barrier to national cohesiveness, driving him to exclaim: “We have no sense of equality”, and (c) the need to assure Muslims of their full rights in secular India¹². It is amazing that he did not associate the issues of women’s status with any of these problems. Similarly, many scholars of that period had established the fact that the women’s question was either removed, or pushed under the carpet during and just after the nationalist movement¹³.

Towards Equality- Status of Women Report – Another major contribution was through the role she played in the publication of the trailblazing *Towards Equality Report* in 1974¹⁴. The Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Government of India had to present a report on the status of women in the country at the UN Women’s Conference in Mexico in 1975. No such national report was available. In order to make the presentation, the Government set up a committee to conduct surveys and produce a report for the UN meet. Vinaji had returned to the UGC in May 1972. Confusion had been prevailing in the Ministry for the last two years in relation to the work that had to be done for the report. Pressure was also mounting since time was limited. After a week of her arrival, her mentor and friend J. P Naik came to her and introduced her to Dr. Phulrenu Guha who was the Chairperson of the Committee constituted by the Government for writing the report which was called “Towards Equality : Status of Women in India” (CSWI). Vinaji was made the member Secretary of the Committee. The other renowned people working with her were Dr. Phulrenu Guha, Maniben Kara, Savitri Shyam, Neera Dogra, Vikram Mahajan, Leela Dube, Sakina A. Hasa, Urmila Haksar, and Lotika Sarkar.

Research for CSWI- Conducting research for the *Towards Equality Report* was a big challenge. Vinaji tried to make a list of people who were also her good friends and would help her in the time of crisis for the researches to be conducted for the sub-goals. Some of the prominent people in the list were Shiv Kumar Mitra, then Additional Director in NCERT. The major task given to him was to see the influence of Coeducation or Single Sex institutions on the performance levels of students¹⁵. This study was collaborated with the efforts of Prof. Durganand Sinha also an ex-Patna colleague of Vinaji, then at Allahabad University. Some other names were Ashish Bose, a Statistician, Prof. VM Siriskar, Professor of Political Science in Pune University, Lalit Sen, (in the National Institute of Community Development, Hyderabad) and Professor Iqbal Narayan (Political Scientist in Rajasthan University). The members interacted and interviewed people from all walks and sections of society to gather data for the compiling of the report.

As the work of the CSWI progressed, conditions at Vinaji’s House became quite stressful. Her husband wanted her to look after their daughters and discourage the eldest one, Indrani, to enter politics. Serious differences of opinions made the two separate although they parted peacefully.

The eldest daughter, Shashwati, took the responsibility of looking after her father and the remaining three, Indrani, Ranjani and Surajit stayed with the mother.

All this happened when Vinaji was totally involved with her professional commitments and with her the work for the CSWI report. This became her foremost priority. The chapters on Law, Education, Political Participation etc. were smoothly done, but there was great difficulty faced by the CSWI team in drafting the chapter on Economic Status. The chapter was framed and reframed a number of times with the combined efforts of Lotika Sarkar, Kumud Sharma, a senior researcher and Vinaji. When the chapter on Women and Economy was in progress, Vinaji's realized that the work was at a point when her full attention was required. Despite their protests, she decided to send Indrani to a hostel and the younger two children to her sister's house while she herself moved into Phulrenudi's room in the office where she had been camping since the drafting had been going on.

The committee's work was over by 31st of December, 1974. Phulrenudi had kept the Committee in session continuously from 15th December. No one in the committee was allowed to leave Delhi, because there was a meeting every day. They met the deadline to finish the CSWI report by working round the clock for the last six months, and, as time would tell, the report created a national and international stir and vindicated all their efforts.

Institutional Contributions- IAWS and CWDS, Delhi

Dr. Vina Mazumdar played a stellar role in the establishment of the two premier institutions/organizations of the country – the Centre for Women and Development Studies and the Indian association of Women's Studies. The findings from the CSWI report served as a catalyst for many organizations and individuals to work for the cause of women in the country. There was a determination to change the social current prevailing against them. After working with the UGC, ICSSR and CWDS, Vinaji reported that one of the causes of the success in bringing about changes in laws and developmental policies was the successful alliance between women in academia and their counterparts at the higher levels of bureaucracy.

The Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) :was established on the 19th of April 1980, in the middle of the International Women's Decade, by a group of men and women, who were involved in the preparation of the first ever comprehensive government report on the 'Status of Women in India' entitled '**Towards Equality**' (Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, (CSWI), Government of India) and who were later associated with the Women's Studies Programme of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). The Advisory Committee of Women's Studies of the ICSSR recommended the need for an autonomous institute to build on the knowledge already generated, but with a wider mandate and resources to expand its activities in research and action¹⁶. The recommendation was accepted by the ICSSR, and communicated to the Women's Bureau of the Ministry of Social Welfare,

Government of India.

A few months later, under the leadership of the late Prof. J.P. Naik, the CWDS was registered under the Societies' Registration Act, 1860 in New Delhi and started functioning from May 1980, with a small financial grant from the Vikram Sarabhai Foundation, under the Chairpersonship of Dr. Phulrenu Guha and Dr. Vina Mazumdar as the Director.

In 1984-85, on the recommendation of a visiting committee appointed by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, CWDS began to receive an annual maintenance grant from the ICSSR and became recognized as one of the Research Institutes supported by ICSSR.

Indian Association of Women's Studies (IAWS) : Another landmark contribution of Vinaji was the significant role she played in the establishment of the Indian Association of Women's Studies. Following the mandate of the 1981 National Conference on Women's Studies, those who were in the forefront of that conference met in 1982 and established the Indian association of Women's Studies¹⁷. Some of these scholars were Neera Desai, Vina Mazumdar, Maithereyi Krishnaraj, Madhuri Shah, Kumud Sharma, Hemlata Swarup, and Asok Mitra. J.P. Naik had not lived to see the fruition of an idea first articulated by him (Mazumdar, 2001b). Since its inception however, IAWS played a very active role in propagating the cause of WS in various ways and gradually it was accepted as a partner by the UGC in implementing the WS programme. The IAWS played a crucial role in the establishment of Women's Studies as an academic discipline in Indian Universities and colleges.

National Policy on Education (NPE).

The government circulated document, *Challenge of Education: a Policy perspective* had started a nationwide debate on the National Policy on Education (NPE). This debate identified the basic issues that the NPE had to resolve to prepare the new generation for the twenty-first century. In November 1985, a National Seminar on Education for Women's Equality, convened by the government, openly proclaimed that the most significant unfinished goals were those related to the achievement of women's equality, their access to justice and dignity and the freedom of choice for which education was recognized as an essential vehicle. In order to complete this task, 'education, from now on, must address the structures and attitudes that have prevented women's equality till now, and have perpetuated and strengthened patriarchal values and institutions that subordinate women' (Mazumdar and Pandey, 1988)¹⁸.

The parliamentary mandate to use Women's Studies as an "instrument for social engineering" through the National Policy on Education 1986 marked a culmination of the efforts initiated a decade back' commented Vina Mazumdar (1988 a). But she warned the national workshop on Women's Studies jointly organized by the ICSSR and SNDT Women's University in January

1988, that the implementation of this mandate will not depend on the Government, 'but on the wider, active and effective participation by persons and institutions within the educational system' (1988a).

Academic Endeavours- Vinaji was a successful academician, a hardworking scholar and a staunch believer in the fact that education can be and has to be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. She was also aware of the shortcomings of our education system and felt that the academic community must be held collectively responsible for the failure of the system in the country. She said, "As an academic and educational planner, I too had contributed to this 'intellectual purdah that excluded the majority of Indian women's lives, labour, dignity and dreams from any public attention. The educational process- my great love and priority- had acquired an inimical demonic face, and our idealized democratic state- in which I had taken such pride- had at best to be held guilty of criminal negligence and at worst of oppression and exploitation of that vast majority".

Some of her major academic contributions are mentioned below-

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- *Role of rural women in development*. University of Sussex. Institute of Development Studies. Allied Publishers, 1978.
- *Symbols of power: studies on the political status of women in India*. Allied, 1979.
- *Women and rural transformation: two studies* with Rekha Mehra, Kunjulekshmi Saradamoni. ICSSR. Centre for Women's Development Studies. Pub. Concept, 1983.
- *Emergence of the Women's Question in India and the Role of Women's Studies*. Centre for Women's Development Studies, 1985.
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- *Peasant Women Organise for Empowerment: The Bankura Experiment*. Centre for Women's Development Studies. 1989.
- *Women workers in India: studies in employment and status*, with Leela Kasturi, Sulabha Brahme, Renana Jhabvala. ICSSR. Chanakya Publications, 1990. ISBN 978-81-70010-73-9.
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- *The Mind and the Medium. Explorations in the Evolution of British Imperial Policy in India.* Three Essays Collective. 2010. ISBN 978-81-88789-64-1
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