

#feminism: Sexism in Indian science

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India has a dismal 14 per cent of women researchers compared to 37 per cent for Sri Lanka, 20 per cent for Pakistan, 26 per cent for Iran and 40 per cent for Sudan. (Representational image)

A recent Unesco report on gender gap among men and women researchers throws up some startling facts. While countries in Latin America, Caribbean and Southeast Asia have a good number of women researchers, South Asia has the lowest numbers. India has a dismal 14 per cent of women researchers compared to 37 per cent for Sri Lanka, 20 per cent for Pakistan, 26 per cent for Iran and 40 per cent for Sudan.

The problem of gender parity in science can be traced back to the way science was understood by many influential thinkers who often held antagonistic views about a woman's capability to understand and perform "science". Much of this was due to the strange belief that science was somehow an epitome of rational thought and that women did not have the capacity of rationality, like men.

For hundreds of years then, women were kept out of labs. It was only during the early 20th Century that women were made part of core research and even then, there were problems. Seminal work by women

was often published in the name of their male bosses — some of which even won the men Nobels! And one might think the number of women in science today has increased but the way they have been perceived has been far more difficult to change.

Today, it is far more easier to accept women as “labourers of science” and not as leaders of science — for example, there has not been one woman director of the many IITs or the many major science institutes in India so far. The point is merely this: the prejudicial belief that women cannot do great science is very strong, even today. But this belief is now manifested through more subtler means. Evolution and even genetics are often used to suggest that women cannot do science as well as the men. So also the claim that women are more emotional rather than rational, as if rationality is only the privilege of men.

Another powerful tactic of making sure women remain subordinate to men in science is by invoking motherhood. Women are denied positions because of actual or potential motherhood which is why any invocation of the woman’s expected “duty” towards family should be seen as a synonym of the more blatant claim that women cannot do science. But is it really about capability of women? In humans, there is a difference between any two individuals in terms of skill. But we cannot extrapolate the differences between individuals and convert them into a differences between groups such as men and women.

The problem is then with science, as a discipline. Science is as patriarchal and casteist as the society from which it comes from. Institutions are often islands of comfort away from the real world and they insulate themselves from social responsibility. Similar arguments have also been used against those belonging to deprived castes. The scientific community in India has been the most vocal opponent of reservation and has even succeeded in securing exemptions in some cases. It has built a false sense of merit based on obscure claims and with this pretense, they have kept out millions of students from various castes.

But how has science managed to get away with all this casteism and sexism? Simple. It has succeeded by making sure that social scientists and humanities scholars are not made a part of the evaluation of science in India. Scientists alone decide on the evaluation of the social impact of science. Students of science are taught science as if it is only about some facts about the world with no sense of history, or philosophy behind it. Science’s exclusionary practice towards women and the disadvantaged castes are then extended to the knowledge system represented by the social sciences, humanities, arts and literature. Ironically, the more they succeed in these exclusions, the more the larger society will pay.

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