



Nārīvāda Prakalpa: Gender, Culture & Civilization Network



Introduction

The IGNCA is premier national institution engaged in the preservation, dissemination of knowledge in the fields of arts, culture, lifestyle studies and folklore. It encompasses the experience and study of all the artistic traditions that enhance human life. One of the major aims of the Centre is to elucidate the formative and dynamic factors in the complex web of interactions among diverse social strata, communities, regions and gender as inherent in the rich cultural heritage of India. The IGNCA is concerned with the integral study of culture pertinent to the Indian ethos and reality. This approach presupposes an interdisciplinary dialogue among disciplines.

Background

In the past the Centre has been involved in projecting several dimensions of women's creativity in the field of photography, fine arts, performing arts and the indigenous expressions of women through local knowledge systems such as, embroidery, crafts, poetry, folklore and rituals. In 2003, the IGNCA organized an international seminar on "Reframing Gender in the Context of Culture of India". The seminar brought together eminent scholars from different disciplines to explore the ways in which cultural resources can be used as a tool for the empowerment of women. Nārīvāda: Gender, Culture and Civilization Network is a spin off from the various exploratory efforts of IGNCA in the field of gender and culture.



In recent years, most explorations in the field of gender and culture in India have been viewed from a Marxist, Socialist, Liberal or Modern perspective in the context of the socio-political reality of our society. These approaches have consigned cultural resources, such as religious scriptures and texts, symbols, powerful feminine icons in oral and written tradition, myths, and legends, life-style of primal communities and grass-root traditions to the dust heap of history. In most cases, these cultural resources have been looked at from a Western or alien perspective and have suffered from the onslaught of the reductive theoretical positions that modernity adopts to view ancient or civilizational cultures. Can we make these areas as a point of departure for changing our attitudes towards the gender question? The primary aim of Nārīvāda Network is to look upon such hidden and hitherto neglected areas where culture becomes a main resource for women's empowerment. The main objectives is to revalidate the rich cultural resources to create a platform of discourse along with gender activism which presupposes the value of these resources.

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The IGNCA views women's contribution to art and culture as an integral part of its endeavor. Nārīvāda: Gender, Culture & Civilization Network was launched in 2002 to create a space for discourse on women's culture, which is airbrushed from history, marginalized or distorted by misperception of history. The aim of Nārīvāda Programme is to recover lost and suppressed voices of women; revision and contextualize women's cultural resources and traditional knowledge systems as an integral element of gender studies; and to emphasize and re-assess the key role women have played in the creation, preservation and transmission of our cultural heritage.



Since its inception in 2002, Nārīvāda has carried out research on two of its in-house projects. **Kala Aur Katha, Women's Art & Expression in Mithila** brought together fifty women artists from villages of Madhubani district belonging to all social classes (Brahman, Kayastha, Dusadh) on the occasion of the Madhu-Shravani Parva, (15 July-7 August 2006), the festival dedicated to snake deities during the monsoon season. An integrated documentation on the fifteen narratives, songs and rituals associated with the festival were recorded at the workshop. In the second workshop on the theme **Gunvati Nari**, the women expressed their mythical and historical role models who have made impact on their lives. As a result of these two workshops a research document is proposed in the form of a book with contributions from leading scholars and renowned authors.



The second project **Imaat: Women Patrons of Delhi: From Razia Sultan to Mubarak Begum (ca. 1240-1823 A.D.)** is envisaged as an inquiry into looking at women's subjects as active historical agents. It recognizes and acknowledges the role models women have played in creation and evolution of material culture such as temples, forts, *dargahs*; the landscape of piety such as gardens, groves, avenues, lakes, wells, *ghats*, rest-houses, palaces etc. Under this project 44 monuments have been identified, hitherto neglected and unrecognized. The visual documentation is explained by a wide range of authoritative articles by well-known scholars. An exhibition and an illustrated catalogue on the findings are proposed. A third research programme entitled: **A Women's Delhi from Purani Dilli to New Delhi (Ca. 1870-1950)** focused on women's contribution to the culture of Delhi. The documentation covers the contribution of Delhi-based women in the area of visual and performative arts such as music, literature, crafts, photography, films, journalism, dance and drama, social welfare, law, education and spirituality, as well as women who made a significant contribution to the freedom movement.



A unique first of its kind programme entitled **Research in Textual Studies and Women's literature in Sanskrit from 3000 BC to 2000 AD** was introduced in **Kalakosa** and concerned with publication of annotated text and translation of fundamental sources in Sanskrit. In view of the authentic research in Sanskrit literature carried out by **Kalakosa**, the Nārīvāda introduced the Vidhushi Project on Women's writings in Sanskrit, which endeavors to reevaluate the neglected and suppressed voices of women in Sanskrit literature. Under the Vidhushi Project the Nārīvāda had organized two workshops to reclaim the voices of Vedic Rishikas and women's writings in Sanskrit from 3000 BC to 2000 AD. An

important aim of this project is to set aside stereotype myths and prejudices often put forward about women in India.



Apart from these in-house projects the Nārīvāda has launched a number of collaborative projects with Women Studies Research Centres in India. Under this three research studies have been completed in collaboration with Women Studies Research Centre, University of Calcutta: *Three Undiscovered Women Painters from West Bengal* (Chitraniha Chowdhury and Kamala Roychowdhury) by Chilka Ghose; *A Photographic Essay by Women in Brahma Samaj* by Konkana Sengupta; and *Stitching Dreams, Creating Livelihood – A Study on Kantha Embroidery by Women* by Dr. Rituparna Basu. A study on *Women and Culture of Rice in the Musahar Community* is being carried out by the Deshkal Society, New Delhi. Research Centre of Women Studies, SNDT University, Mumbai has also undertaken research work on alternative healing practices of women.

Nārīvāda has been deeply engaged in promoting original studies in

under research areas, such as, *Gender and Knowledge System in the North East*, a study conducted by Dr. Alka Saikia focusing on new epistemologies; Ethnicity and Livelihood Studies record personal histories of a selective number of women tribal artists from Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra by charting out patterns of growth and creativity; Recovery of Oral Histories of Women particularly pertaining to Women and Nationalism and personal histories of women from marginal groups. Two studies have so far been completed i.e. **Painted Identities: Conversation with Three Women Tribal Artists from Madhya Pradesh** by Indira Mukherjee and **A Passion for Freedom: The Story of Kisanin Jaggi Devi** by Deepti Priya Mehrotra (published).

Nārīvāda has brought out the following seven CD-ROM's on the following themes: *A Dialogue with Women Priestess of Lepchas* (A film by Bappa Ray); *The Journey of Bhikkunis* (A film by Bappa Ray); *Brahmavadinis: The First Women's Gurukul in India*; *Recollection of a Satyagrahi* (A film by Kalpana Subramaniam); *The Mirasans of Punjab: Born to Sing* (A film by Shika Jhingan); *Seeking Moksha: The Vaishnavis of Vrindaban*; *Gram Banglar Nadir Moner Kotha, Bengali Folk Songs by Women* (Audio CD).

Nārīvāda has also brought out a set of five individual papers. Eight books on selective themes from the above research are in the process of being published. As a part of its ongoing programmes Nārīvāda organizes lectures by eminent scholars from the field of Gender and Culture and presents innovative exhibitions related to women's contribution to culture.

Nārīvāda is actively involved in dialogue and debates with student community in various colleges of Delhi to introduce and sensitize them to the positive role that women's culture can play in promoting women's empowerment.



Orientations

- To create a new paradigm and 'Hermeneutics' of gender discourse.
- To create a new vantage point of looking at our past by taking a constructive, rather than a destructive view of civilization resources.
- To recognize the importance of multi-cultural matrix and hybridity that forms the basis of Indian culture; to use this understanding as a lens for revisioning a constructive dialogue and critical explorations in all spheres of our tradition, written and oral, in urban, rural and tribal settings, through interdisciplinary studies.
- To create theories and methodologies with an indigenist intent with the aim of articulating new vocabularies.
- To collect and to bring together all the research documents available from all over India on the 'Intangible Heritage' of women.
- To work by and large from and within existing social frames in urban, rural and primal communities in tribal belt of India. This is based on the understanding that the social frameworks in the given Indian context (with the exception of isolated pockets in urban areas) are different from the Western notion of high-ranking, self-centered and self sufficient individualism. Our social frames are based on community participation, social privileges and duty-centered social ethics. This basic frame is the foundation of community centered sister-networks in India which need to be tapped.
- To give legitimacy to women's experience over carefully constructed highly theoretical insular debates.
- To support, new social frames that empowers women, such as the panchayati raj movement, which is anchored in creating leadership of women in the political and social spheres.
- To motivate and support gender activism.

Partner Networks

Our partner networks in this venture include intersectoral government bodies, university faculties in India and abroad; academic experts in the field of gender, religion and cultural studies, NGO's, international agencies and a panel of distinguished resource persons.

IGNCA Committee

The IGNCA committee consists of all the faculty members and professional staff from the four departments (KK, KN, JS, KD) chaired by the Member-Secretary.

Proposed Projects

The projects in this area cover research, publications, promoting awareness and advocacy, networking with other institutions, governmental bodies and resource persons, organizing seminars, conferences, colloquiums, workshops and catalyzing gender activism. the

following two major projects are being explored:

Documentation on the Oral History of Women about the Making of the Indian Nation

The contemporary history of women's problems, roles and status presents a picture of complexity. Despite the explosion of research and publications, there are several crucial areas of research, which have been neglected. One area of profound significance is the relationship between women's empowerment and the process of socio-political formation that resulted in the birth of the Indian Nation. We will explore the alternative oral history of 'Her-stories of Nationalism' of women who were participants, onlookers, or receivers of stories of the freedom movement from the older generation of women. There are innumerable women whose silent voices need to be heard. Some contemporary feminists believe that collective feminism in India was born in the first wave feminism in the 1970's . This is untrue. The oral popular history of women patriots may prove otherwise.

The project proposes to record the retelling of the experiences, motivations and Gandhi's strategy of non-violent revolt from women's perspective. Regional and cultural pluralism of India makes these conversations a vivid historiography of the people who embody half the sky.

Documentation of Endangered Wisdom Traditions and Traditional Knowledge Systems of Women

This project aims to document and disseminate women's contribution to the endangered 'Intangible Heritage' in the following areas: (1) Aesthetic Systems: art and crafts; (2) Representations of Collective Memory: oral narratives, songs and legends; (3) Rituals and Ceremonies in the domestic and public spheres; (4) Traditional Environment Management Systems; (5) Traditional Healing Systems; and (6) Women's protection of food diversity and agrarian knowledge. In the first phase, we propose to carry out this research in Madhubani, Bihar, Chattisgarh, Orissa and in the states of Arunachal and Assam in North-east India.