

*OCCASIONAL PAPER*

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**Gender, History and The Recovery of  
Knowledge with Information and  
Communication Technologies :  
Reconfiguring the Future of Our Past**

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# **GENDER, HISTORY, AND THE RECOVERY OF KNOWLEDGE WITH INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES : RECONFIGURING THE FUTURE OF OUR PAST**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper is written from the perspective of a feminist humanities academic and analyses ways in which information and communication technologies (ICTs) may be used to recover women's history and women's writing, as well as to further activist feminist initiatives in realms such as basic education, while refusing to succumb to currently dominant neo-liberal dispensations that sees ICTs in masculinist, instrumental, and technocratic terms. It moves from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in Britain, looking at the ways in which a radical writer like Mary Wollstonecraft adeptly used the communication technologies available in print in her time to further women's rights and women's education, to 20<sup>th</sup>-century Bengali writers such as Jyotirmoyee Devi and Rokeya Hossain, who also wrote powerfully on women's rights and women's education. While some of Wollstonecraft's works have been successfully digitised, those of the Bengali writers, and many more such Indian women writers, need to be digitised. However, such potential large-scale humanities and feminist projects are damaged by paucity of public funding, operating in line with a utilitarian and neo-liberal ideology. The paper argues that the Schools of Women's Studies in India, bridging activism and knowledge, and civil society organizations such as Vacha in Mumbai, have successfully shown how feminist knowledge recovery and activism clamouring for continued public commitment to such activities can go hand in hand. Finally, it argues that while women have historically evolved an edge (valuable in the current global knowledge-economy) in developing flexible, multitasking capabilities, this does not mean that feminist intellectuals have no option*

*but to become complicit with neo-liberal ideologies which seek to make flexibility and multitasking part and parcel of an economy that both manipulates and marginalizes women and the humanities.*

Let us begin with a scenario. We are sitting in front of a computer at an academic institution, and open the Internet browser. We go to the popular Google search page, and type as an exact phrase search term "Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman", a text published in 1798, written by the revolutionary intellectual and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. This is at once a passionately political work, bringing together the sufferings of the working-class woman Jemima and the middle-class woman Maria, and a creative one, in the form of a novella. We find a free electronic text of this work (<http://www.infomotions.com/etexts/scratch/wollstonecraft-maria-196.pdf>), and even a free electronic index or concordance that someone has prepared as a labour of love for the work.

At this point, one remembers the Bengali writers Jyotirmoyee Devi and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain in Bengali whom this author works on, both as translator, and as researcher of the history of female education and representations of female development. It would be enormously helpful to have some of their Bengali texts scanned in on-line, in the same way that *Maria* is available, using one of the dynamic Bengali fonts now widely available, so that these digital copies could be disseminated worldwide. Preparing a concordance could be a further useful tool for readers and scholars trying to understand and learn from the creativity and action that women such as Rokeya harnessed and unleashed in developmental areas such as the furtherance of female education, which is still in an abject state in South Asia. The passionate commitment of Jyotirmoyee, a practising Hindu, and Rokeya, a practising Muslim, to an unsectarian, multi-faith Indian society would also be available to egalitarian, secular readers and scholars.

Many women's studies centres and feminist groups in India have undertaken successful projects to reprint the works of

forgotten women writers, such as Jyotirmoyee and Rokeya, resulting in print publication of a few hundred copies of each work, as for example the School of Women's Studies at Jadavpur University and its collections of recovered Bengali women's writing, from Jyotirmoyee to Anindita Devi. (J. Devi, 2001; A. Devi, 1997) But in the digital paradigm shift that is taking place with the information revolution, ease of access as well as foolproof preservation would be better facilitated by digital encoding and preservation. Most importantly, digitalisation allows copies to be printed off the computerised files at will, so that the difficulty of copies going out of print is removed, and the cost of their reprinting is vastly lessened.

In our hypothetical scenario, we now visit the web-page of the Brown Women Writers' Project (<http://www.wwp.brown.edu>), started in 1986, one of the pioneering textual encoding and recovery projects that brought back to readers and researchers a multitude of forgotten English-language women-authored texts. I notice, however, that in the last two years, it has changed from a free public knowledge source to a paid subscription-based service. Its subscription, of 100 US dollars a year, is not meagre for a Third World academic, but this is still a vastly better scenario than other digital knowledge initiatives of a commercial nature. For example, the publishing firm Chadwyck-Healy has created a very large and useful database of literary works in English, called Literature Online (<http://www.lion.co.uk>), which is unaffordable even for a First World academic as individual: only if her institution buys the expensive subscription will she be able to access these. No Third World academic history or literature department, cash-starved and otherwise materially depleted as they are, could dream of subscribing.

Indeed, under the current neo-liberal dispensation, those of us who study arts and literature or history in India are increasingly viewed as redundant items, and facilities too are being withdrawn and downgraded for academic professionals in these fields. I remember the many bright faces from such disciplines I have seen recently who are working for part-time

jobs or contractually for pittance in colleges, with no professional free access to computers or the Internet in these institutions. We are told that instead of students doing 'useless' subjects such as history and literature, we need functional and utilitarian professionals, notably in the IT sector. In such circumstances, how many of the intellectuals or activists I know could afford the Internet time required to download and print out these supposed e-texts in the Indian regional languages one was thinking of encoding?

There is more cause for worry. Basic education is in a sorry state in India. In our country the overall literacy rate, defined as the bare ability to sign one's name, is 65% among men and women, and only 54% among women. At least 65 million girls are not enrolled in school. It is estimated that 100 million boys and girls all in all are outside the school net. The majority of those who do go to school do not complete even five years of schooling.

This too in a country where a tiny section of the population has access to even basic standards of telephony. Even with a significant spurt in telephone connectivity, telephone density was 5 per 100 inhabitants as on March 31, 2003, and the rural-urban divide was significant. (Chandrasekhar, 2003)

Viewed in this light, a depressing scenario seems to emerge. One can make many kinds of objections to the 'luxury' of 'elite feminists' investing 'scarce and much-needed resources' in 'fanciful' projects of historical recovery of women's creativity and production across centuries, as for example would be represented by the enterprise of creating an Indian Women Writers' Project, with texts in the major regional languages being recovered, scanned in, annotated, and indexed.

This pejorative attitude is particularly easily achieved in India, the mecca of the globalizing IT export industry, where the share of exports in IT industry output touched 61 per cent in 2001-02. More growth, more functional IT output and export, more progress, would chant many voices, as well as less history,

less annoying feminist humanities academics, less redundancy, and more utilitarianism.

As for the literacy and basic education problem, or the growing digital divide, economic growth would, by 'downward filtration' (shall we remember colonial Indian history, and the familiarity of this argument?) reach the masses, and meanwhile some beneficent corporate sector professionals would philanthropically donate some hundreds more computers, even as there is clamour for a move towards privatisation of even state-funded basic education, with schemes suggested such as vouchers being given by the state to private schools for universalising education, on the model of Pinochet's Chile.

This sort of proposal comes in an era when there is a futuristic thrust to most current Indian conceptualisations of Information and Communication Technology, together with a bias which is most often too technocratic, and too driven by the interests of market-driven private corporations. Furthermore, expert technologists, whether hardware engineers, software technicians, or laboratory researchers, seem to control the means of production in ICT, with technology out of reach both of the layperson, and of the poor person. There has also been a highly masculinist thrust to ICT. In today's India, in the golden corridors of policymakers in hubs of IT such as Chandrababu Naidu's Andhra Pradesh, there is also an obtuse opposition posited between such 'obsolete' disciplines as history or feminist humanities research on the one hand, and IT or ICT on the other.

But ICT at its best retrieves, rediscovers, and re-presents the past. It has been and can be consummately used by those concerned with the intersection of gender, history, and knowledge, to create new forms of knowledge, and to recover, preserve, and re-present the creativity of marginalized groups such as women, the working classes, or Dalits.

When activist scholarship uses ICT to recover knowledge of history and gender, what seemed to be the hard, cold lines of technology driven by dominant-interest masculinist groups and corporate oligarchies becomes instead an instrument of change which invents a new kind of knowledge-system for the future,

one which cherishes, preserves, revisits, and learns from the richness and complexity of the past.

We shall consider the difficulties and possibilities of creating our own Third World projects of digital recovery of the history of women, not in a way that blindly mimics the West, but which shapes it anew according to our particular needs, resources, and abilities. Difficulties stem around software or money, but most importantly around activist-initiative, and the signal inability of institutional structures in contemporary India to fund and encourage innovative humanities research, in line with a destructive neo-liberal ideology of higher education that seeks to marginalize and invisibilise research in the humanities. We shall consider how we may work with such paradigms and find ways ahead.

Our stance is critical of the current mindset of certain sections of Indian policy-makers and academia which sees IT as a tool for national development in a simplistic and un-self-reflexive fashion, rather naively believing that if IT continues to act as a tool of upward mobility for a group of middle-class and upper class Indians, it will automatically become a powerful tool for developmental areas such as gender empowerment and progress in removing illiteracy and ensuring that all children complete a full cycle of school.

Earlier this year, I was interviewed, along with a range of other academics in development studies, education, IT, and management, by a Canadian post-graduate student from the London School of Economics who was writing a dissertation on the sociology of IT in higher education in India, and how important is the value accorded by the Indians he interviewed to the role of IT or ICT as a tool for poverty alleviation or other developmental activities that reach the masses.

His answer (Ezer, 2003) is that this role is given low priority, with the majority of his interviewees believing that the first role of ICT was to further the careers and upward mobility of the middle and upper class Indians who can afford higher IT education, while second in importance came the value attached to ICT as a tool of strengthening the geo-political and economic

interests of India. Much lower down came the role of ICT education as an agent of poverty alleviation or other welfarist development. This is a sorry state of affairs.

We propose a very different scenario, from the perspective of a feminist humanities academic in development studies. It is particularly interested in education and voice, and how information and communication technologies may be used, in an integrated way, to recover and preserve neglected or forgotten women's history and writing, to create much-needed massive momentum to advance basic education, especially for girls, and to foreground, in the context of working with ICTs, social and gendered human capabilities and agency. A bedrock of this enterprise is a breakdown or de-mystification of the hierarchising of knowledge, and of the over-valuation of technocracy and corporate power that is currently dominant.

We propose that with this humanist, feminist, human-capability-centred integrated perspective, furtherance of basic education, recovery of women's creativity and history, and furtherance of research in the humanities, including feminist research, can all harness Information and Communication Technologies effectively, productively, and innovatively.

We also propose that there is an urgent need to break down any false opposition posited between higher education and basic education. For this we must see women as change agents, who simultaneously advance their own lifelong learning, and also work to further basic education for others, with special sensitivity to marginalized and socially excluded groups. In this paradigm, Information and Communication Technology becomes a major tool for social change.

Articulate acts of female self-construction, describing women's lifelong learning, through narrative, both real-life and fictional, are powerful modes for expressing female agency: such verbalization and expression are now widely recognised as part of the important role that voice plays in development. Narratives of women's self-development transmitted through ICTs, representing how women's capabilities are formed in difficult conditions, have significant roles to play in demystifying the

overspecialised arcana of technocracy and the undervaluing of women's history, creativity, and basic education.

The Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells has been one of the most extraordinary chroniclers (Castells, 1996; Castells, 1997; Castells, 1998) of the second industrial revolution, which is also an information revolution. His sympathy for mass social democracy and movements for social change such as the Ciapas movement in Mexico or the women's liberation movement globally marks out his voice as very different from the technocratic triumphalism so often heard in the context of ICT.

His claim has been that the information age does indeed put a premium on knowledge processing as integral to productivity: what is known as informatisation. It links more people than ever through a plethora of networks, but, paradoxically, breeds a strong sense of disparate, discrete identities, which may range from fundamentalist to left-wing to feminist. He sees the chilling urban Japanese Aum Shiriko cult, which led to gassing of innocent Japanese in the subways by highly sophisticated, net-using Japanese doomsday cult members, as an offshoot of the Network Society. He also analyses the way the Ciapas movement made extremely sophisticated use of Internet technology to transmit their guerrilla messages. Another of his brilliant case-studies is that of the women's liberation movement in Taiwan in the 1980s, which also harnessed the power of the Net.

Indeed, it is unsurprising that identity movements such as feminisms, strongly sweeping the globe, have been attracted to ICT, particularly given that in the larger context we are witnessing the growing flexibilization and feminization of new forms of work in the globalizing age, such as teleworking, where traditional feminine virtues such as conversational skills and courtesy combine with part-time hours and work. The world of ICT has both immense potential and great perils for women, capable of keeping them at the lowest end of the skills ladder, or empowering them to drive the Net, as it were.

Thinking about this scenario, one should remember that when growth in literacy, the industrial revolution, and an explosion of print culture coincided in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century in Britain, the picture of society was very similar. Eighteenth-century Britain had witnessed the growth of what has been termed the polite and commercial culture of Britain, with an attendant feminization of culture, in which commerce and cultivation went hand in hand. From coffee clubs to middle-class drawing-rooms to a huge number of books in the advice-literature and conduct-book mode to numerous women-authored novels, there was a harping on the importance of female influence, the feminine shaping of the household, and the value of civilization and refinement. It was a liberatory as well as tension-ridden time for many middle-class women. (Bagchi, 2004)

Indeed, at this point in history, between 1780 and 1820, the dialectic of Enlightenment was graphically evident, as imperialism took root and changed from commercial imperialism to political imperialism in colonies like India, as the post-French Revolution battle in Britain between radicals and conservatives got fought out in pamphlets and streets, and as the Industrial Revolution created the factory system employing numerous women and children.

It was at this point in history that Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her powerful incomplete work *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, published in 1798 after her death. Education, as so often in women's writing, was shown as much-needed but imperfectly given, both for the enervated, deceived, powerless Maria who is incarcerated by her husband falsely in a mad-house, and for her wardress Jemima, first an illegitimate child, then a family drudge, then a prostitute, then a kept mistress, and finally the wardress of a prison.

Wollstonecraft was a powerful and unusual woman user of the technologies of knowledge of her time. She worked with the radical dissenting journal *Analytical Review*, and reviewed books for it. She was thus a journalist and critic, and also knew the innards of the book-trade of her time. She wrote

novels. She wrote polemical political treatises, from *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, attacking Edmund Burke, to its better-known sequel *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She used the medium of print as a versatile tool to present her radical, rational point of view, as woman, as pro-French Revolution political writer, as spokesperson for female education, and as upholder of the rights of working people and working women, including prostitutes. She also wrote books on basic education, primers of sorts, that taught little boys and girls early lessons.

Women such as Wollstonecraft lacked access to the system of formal education: anything beyond school was barred to women, and even in the schooling system, there was no national system of education of the sort that French feminists such as Olympe de Gouges fought for but failed to win after the French Revolution. After fierce struggles worldwide, today women do have access to all layers of education, though women's presence in higher education is still a battle that is re-negotiated every day.

But from women like Wollstonecraft, who by force of circumstance had to juggle levels and varieties of education that could only come to them outside the formal system, we have much to learn about the necessity of not getting locked into fragmented, mystified, overspecialised hierarchies of knowledge. The nimble flexibility of such pioneering women is again becoming a valued tool in the informational shift, which sees a simultaneous, usually contradictory, value being placed on a high degree of specialization on the one hand and on a high degree of flexibility and openness to adaptation on the other.

We know that women, through history, have been highly adept multi-taskers, most often juggling household labour, domestic roles, and work in the public sphere. Even when they have been radical or revolutionary intellectuals of a pioneering nature, like Mary Wollstonecraft, they have, even while protesting the 'wrongs of woman' and indeed the 'wrongs of man', successfully worn many different hats, from journalist to critic to writers of text-books to political writers to novelists.

We believe that re-inventing for our times this activist enterprise as well as integration of different kinds and layers of knowledge is absolutely imperative if we are to bridge the digital divide, further basic education, and value the recovery of creative marginalized voices from the past. This way, women retain the advantage that they have paradoxically had to garner because they have had to find ways around patriarchy, in an age when managers and academics alike are advocating engaging in life-long learning, said to be characteristic of the economy in the Information Age.

We also think it imperative that it is we Third World activists, academics, and people who should take the initiative and find the enterprise to do this, rather than let the initiative pass to benevolent First World philanthropists or corporate bodies, who will make us thankful recipients of their entrepreneurship.

To illustrate this, let us go to a web-page titled <http://www.spiderwebhelp.com>. This records the voices of a group of girls who are learning computer science and web skills in the Calcutta Social Project in Kolkata, under the aegis of a Swedish philanthropic project. This is a wonderful idea, and an innovative project. It is also happening under the aegis of an organization which is distinguished, started by Satyajit Ray's cousin Kalyani Karlekar and her left-leaning husband, an organization which had created pioneering homes, schools and training schemes for women and adolescent girls in the Manoharpukur area of south Kolkata.

In these web-pages, we encounter the fresh, excited, learning voices of a group of girls and women who have created the web-pages themselves as they continue to learn on their course. Some describe their parents and parental home, others their husbands, while all describe what work they do and how their computer skills might help them in their life and work. Using technology, humanity is cultivated in this project, and the vocational skills of the girls are also expanded.

But the dual impulse of social justice and social

entrepreneurship is led by a foreign voice, that of a Swedish entrepreneur with a Slavic name, and this is deeply symptomatic of our times. The social democratic state that the constitution-makers and freedom-fighters of India created, notably its commitment to education as a public good that everyone has a right to, which will be fostered in a developmental state, is being eroded in a whole variety of insidious ways. Even as on paper the Right to Education has been made a fundamental right, grim material conditions, notably the federal fiscal crisis in India, under which the states are reeling, makes it even more difficult for adequate provisioning of free basic education to be implemented.

In the higher education sector, the main brunt of marginalization is being borne by non-utilitarian sectors and subjects, from history to pure mathematics. Instead of emphasis on increasing productivity and excellence in research and teaching, one is increasingly hearing in the public sphere voices proclaiming that these sorts of disciplines are 'redundant'.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development brought out in 1998 a volume called *Knowledge Societies: Information Technology for Sustainable Development*. (Mansell and Wehn, 1998) We learn from this that one cannot have a non-contextual 'best practice' scenario when adopting ICTs for development. Constant sensitivity to context and local needs is crucial to the success of any ICT project for development. It also means that to understand this local terrain, one needs to have trained geographers, sociologists, gender experts, and historians, so that ICTs can move from being only technologies to being tools that people can use adeptly, using their social capabilities. Social capabilities complement technological capabilities and they combine in many different ways to generate economic growth. (Mansell and Wehn, 1998, p. 4)

To illustrate how this may be done, let me invoke a civil society organization in Mumbai, Vacha. This is led by a distinguished Gandhian Gujarati creative writer and critic Sonal Shukla, and functions as a collective. It is housed inside a

school run by the Mumbai Municipal Corporation, and spends a large amount of its energy working with the students of this highly multi-faith, multi-ethnic school. The members of Vacha also travel on field visits for an ongoing, distinguished study of the 'bal kishori' or adolescent girl that they undertake in other schools in Maharashtra and Gujarat. They conduct regular extra classes, including summer classes, for the boys and girls in the school. They also conduct other workshops, including creativity, gender awareness, and acting workshops, for boys and girls. On their computer database, we would find information about the girls they conduct workshops and summer classes for. They run a rich library where academics and non-academics alike can read or even borrow. They also engage in recovery of women's voices, from that of forgotten freedom-fighters to those of Jewish women in India.

Vacha is very much part of an activist women's movement, and takes part regularly in protests and meetings. And they integrate this activism with hands-on, committed work with children in schools, working patiently with them to further gender equity. They have computer classes for the children, and themselves use their modest resources to maintain an online page. Vacha thus recovers women's creativity, history, and agency, works to further basic education for girls and boys while furthering gender equity, and works in a wider women's movement—all the while harnessing the power of ICT.

Yet it seems unclear to us why only non-governmental or civil society organizations should be held to have this kind of integrative power, as is most often propagated by policy-makers in India today. With the right injection of will and enterprise, our state-run educational institutions, whether schools or colleges or universities can themselves, and collaboratively, organise such initiatives, as indeed did take place with the Schools of Women's Studies constituted in Indian universities. Many of these, as for example that at Jadavpur University, have done a fantastic job of integrating teaching courses, guiding research, working as part of the women's movement, collaborating with non-governmental organizations, and engaging in developmental

and welfarist work. As we have said, they have also played major roles in the recovery of women's creativity through publishing programmes.

Recently, though, we were told by the UGC, mouthing the dictates of a Hindu Right government, that these centres would be renamed Schools of Women and Family Studies, dangerously trying to push women back into a primary role as makers and preservers of the family. After continued protests from these centres and feminist activist-intellectuals, the NDA government reversed their decision on the eve of the elections in 2004: a victory won by feminists who used the Net, print media, and television to register their protests at the move.

The move to rename the Women's Studies Schools by the NDA government came at a time when we were being made to believe that the activist women's movement which created such Schools as much as organizations like Vacha will only prosper as non-governmental organizations or ngos willing to be biddable recipients of foreign donors' charity. The neo-liberal state would happily ignore or downplay the committed, multidimensional way in which public, state-funded departments and schools worked to advance social justice and knowledge.

The humanities are a poor, marginal sister in all countries of the world, including some of the economically richest ones such as the UK and the US. Education, too, including basic education, takes a low priority in comparison with defence expenditure quite happily even in the US. So there is no golden First World model for Third World feminists to learn from.

Nonetheless, what is happening currently in India in the separate domains of basic education as well as innovative feminist research is worrying: we are watching the fissuring and fragmentation of knowledge and development into thousands of small, private projects and efforts, each being asked to generate its own funding, while the state becomes more and more inactive in capacity-building, encouragement,



and resource allocation. Indeed, the state exercises its full authority in *sanctioning* its strategic indifference to a number of sectors.

Perhaps then it is even more apposite that we had invoked the late eighteenth century in Britain, when there was no national, public, universal, state-funded system of education, whether basic or higher, that was open to all groups of people. We are, it seems, back again in an age of uncertainty, with a vengeance.

We believe that it would be criminal to let our public higher education system abnegate responsibility for recovering women's history and creativity, for furthering basic education, and for harnessing the power of ICTs in a way that makes the first of these integrally connected to the second. We fought long and hard for the public good of education, and it is simply unacceptable to state that in future, we activist women intellectuals will have to look either to market-driven private corporations or to the aid agencies of former or current imperial powers to support us in our vital *national* enterprise of knowledge-creation and spreading of education.

When I was studying eighteenth-century fictions of female education at the University of Cambridge, I was vastly excited by the online Corvey Project (<http://www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/corvey/>, <http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/>), which is managed and funded by state-run, state-sponsored universities in Britain and Germany, notably Cardiff and Sheffield Hallam Universities in Britain and Paderborn and Innsbruck Universities in Germany and Austria respectively. This project involves preserving a treasure-trove of European, mainly British writing that an eccentric German aristocrat had collected in Corvey Castle. Today, the entire collection has been microfiched, while Cardiff University, Sheffield Hallam University, and Paderborn University all have online databases, as well as online journals that promote the recovery of forgotten women's creativity.

We can undertake our own projects of digital recovery and dissemination of women's history and creativity, if we gather our momentum and socio-political will, and if we see ICT as a powerful tool for re-visioning our *integrated* commitment to primary education for all, to higher education for all, and to the recovery and promotion of women's history.

Flexibility and multitasking multidimensionality are indeed women's edge in the information age: but only if we can energise these for the social good and for enhancing the social capabilities of excluded groups. Without this commitment, feminist humanities scholars are in danger of becoming mere pawns in a market-driven game of development driven by foreign and corporate drivers, in which ICTs are used because they are likely to deepen the market of a Microsoft or a Compaq. Now more than ever it is time to reinvoke knowledge and education as a public good, and to see women as active agents for demanding our right to such public goods from the sovereign democratic Indian state, harnessing the power of ICTs in the public sphere.

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